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How time management is like eating elephants and frogs

By Jennifer Raftis, CPO



Professional Organizer, Jennifer Raftis, CPO founded Efficiency Matters, LLC to help you with all of your organizing needs for your home and business. She is a Certified Professional Organizer and an active board member with NAPO, National Association of Productivity and Organizing Professionals. She is also an independent representative for The Container Store and has expertise in designing closets, garages, pantries, playrooms and more. In addition, she is a Corporate Organizing and Productivity Consultant and has worked with Fortune 500 companies across the U.S. Another large part of her business is move management especially working with seniors who are downsizing. She and her husband have lived in Moraga for 30 years, raising 3 kids and working countless volunteer hours with many local non-profit organizations and schools. Jennifer@efficiencymattersllc.com, 925-698-3756 www.efficiencymattersllc.com know how long it will take.

Here's an example of using this "small bites" strategy. I recently worked with a busy small business owner, his file cabinets were jammed full, and he had piles of papers all over his desk. He couldn't file anything more and he couldn't find anything. It was negatively affecting his productivity and company overall. So, we started by choosing a desired completion date and making a checklist to map out the steps involved to get there:

? First step was to go through the filing cabinets, one-by-one, to shred and recycle all of the outdated files (it's hard to file papers when you can't open the file drawers). This part of the project took several weeks to finish and we referred to the checklist for encouragement that showed our progress.

? We listed each file drawer as a separate step so he could see the progress.

Time management is a subject you probably feel strongly about, either you loathe it or you love it. I have studied time management methods for decades and will share a few basic time management strategies that can help you make substantial, positive changes in how you manage your time. Whether I am working with a company or an individual, the methods are very much the same.

What do elephants and frogs have to do with time management?

Teachers often - in an attempt to make learning fun - use metaphors to help teach certain topics or ideas. I remember attending my first organizing conference, almost a decade ago, and the keynote speaker was talking about gardening. The speech was about growing your business as an entrepreneur. Of course it starts as a seed, water the seed and it grows, so on and so forth. At the time I thought it was rather corny but the visual stuck with me throughout all these years!

With time management, elephants are enormous or daunting projects that you are not sure how to tackle and frogs are the difficult tasks within the project. Sounds so much more interesting than "time management," right?

Elephants - Enormous Projects

Have you ever heard the question: How do you eat an elephant? The answer is . one bite at a time. An elephant is the metaphor for a large, overwhelming project. The idea is that the project is much easier to manage and complete if you break it down into small steps (bites) and don't try to tackle it all at once.

One of the ways to "eat the elephant" is to set a project completion deadline and then list all of the steps that are necessary to complete the project. Next, assign deadlines for each step. One of the benefits of this method is that you are checking off each small step and seeing progress as you move forward. Each step should include an estimate for how long it will take. Note: Estimating time accurately is a learnable skill, but not an easy one. Most of the time we overestimate what we can accomplish in one day or even one hour. ne of the best ways to learn how to estimate time for a task is to keep track of how long tasks actually take to complete, and the next time you tackle the same type of task you will

? The next step was to sort all of the piles of papers on his desk and put them into folders. This aspect of the project felt daunting to the client, so we broke it down into even smaller manageable steps. One hour of sorting each morning (no more!) when he was feeling focused.

After we completed those steps, the client could easily access and manage all of the information to run his business efficiently and had an organized and clean desk to work on. The project was completed on time, and did not feel overwhelming, because we broke it down into smaller (bite size) steps.

This same approach can be used for any home project. A closet, drawer, or even a garage can be broken down into steps, scheduled on a calendar with a date for the desired completion of the project.

Frogs - Undesirable Tasks

So, what do frogs have to do with time management? A frog represents an undesirable or difficult task - like eating a frog (not to offend anyone who loves frogs legs). The key to managing and completing undesirable tasks (frogs) has to do with identifying the tasks that you dread doing. These tasks require the most energy and focus so it should be done when you are feeling the most energized and focused. This best focus period in a day or week is different for everyone. It is important that you identify and know when that time is for you. Is it first thing in the morning or late at night? Early in the week or on the weekend? Using this strategy to "eat the frog" helps to develop new work habits that can be invaluable. Learning to focus your mental resources on one task is very effective, not to mention, efficient.

I find that while you are learning to implement this new focus strategy to manage undesirable tasks, it's important to remove all distractions. That means turning off your phone, not looking at email, or even putting a "do not disturb" sign on your office door. Uninterrupted focus is the key! Your task is the priority and you are in control.

In summary, your large project is the elephant that you will break down into smaller pieces. The frogs are the undesirable or difficult tasks that you need to complete with uninterrupted focus. So get out and eat your elephants and frogs. You can do this!

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