

# Outside the BOX: Essential?

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Watching our 4-year-old twins pack for a weekend trip is a study in perspective on the difference between essential and peripheral. Their favorite stuffed toy is packed into the bag, followed by seven of their best friends because we just

can't have the elephant stuck at home. He might get lonely.

Once an action figure makes the cut, it's Katie bar the door as Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman and the Hulk all pile in. "Oh no, where's Robin?" Ten minutes of frantic searching pass before the Caped Crusader's

sidekick is hauled out from beneath the couch and tossed into the pile.

Deep discussions over books, crayons and snacks occur before it becomes apparent that it will take at least two men and a truck just to get to the airport. Over time, the dynamic duo will learn that all that stuff is more headache than value (I hope) as they develop an understanding about required elements in life and those that are purely electives.

## Time and energy

Ranch management is about making decisions and judgments as to which activities, investments or resources are truly essential. Greg McKeown wrote an exceptional book titled *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*. I doubt that the author had ranchers in mind as a target audience, but his work addresses one of the most critical issues facing ranch managers: Where do I spend my time and energy?

Every ranch manager is confronted with a slew of tasks, decisions and alternatives every day. Some are urgent, others less so; some deserve time and attention, and others less so. The one given is that there are only 24 hours in each of those days.

## Essentialism

There are issues that eat time without much promise of a return, while other concerns are essential and, when effectively addressed, yield significant advantages. Essentialism is the development of a disciplined approach to making decisions about the allocation of time, talent and money. It is based on the assumption that much of what gets our time and attention is not, in the long run, productive. John Maxwell was correct when he said, "You cannot overestimate the unimportance of practically everything."

Whether in the world of high technology start-ups or ranching enterprises, the most successful organizations are those with a very deliberate and focused approach to staying locked in on only those things that matter the most. The key is to discern the high-impact efforts. As McKeown points out, the essential leader understands that there are trade-offs and those trade-offs force difficult decisions. The non-essential leader will give in to the urge to try to do it all.

The essential leader picks their problems, chooses intentionally where to go big and where to disengage or not play at all, and, in the spirit of Stephen Covey's message, understands the difference between the critical few and the trivial multitude. The essential manager recognizes that to really make a difference in the business, time must be set aside to work on the business.

Working on the business means

that leaders must allocate time to step away from the day-to-day activities, the pressing aggravations and the grind to be strategic. Without exception, this means isolating oneself, unplugging from the insistent demands of technology, and dedicating energy to strategic thinking.

**Protect core assets**

In his book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Covey was adamant that leaders must protect the core asset — their own health and well-being — by allocating time for play and recreation, living a healthy lifestyle, and making certain to gain enough sleep to allow both mind and body to recover from the stress of life.

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— *John Maxwell*

The essentialist-driven decision maker is also committed to winnowing down the volume of requests and opportunities to only the most valuable and they establish stringent, relatively narrow criteria to help them stay on task. We are a society that for too long has valued yes over all else. However, experience is teaching us that only when life is dominated by a series of soft acceptances, productivity and performance suffers.

Take a minute and write down how many requests you’ve said yes to in the last three months, as well as the list of the nays. Follow this up with a gut check as to the realized value of those things to which you said yes. When I conducted a similar exercise, I found that my yes list contained far too many low-performing activities.

The process led me to undertaking the very hard work of determining my highest and best contribution, to get that purpose clearly defined, and then having the discipline to protect time to stay on point. The next step was to tackle the painful process of cutting the losses. An intentional approach to quitting the trivial many is not unlike breaking a bad habit. It is uncomfortable and may disrupt those around us, especially those who have managed to convince us to take on their problems for them. Good decision-making means feeding the best opportunities and rejecting the rest.

As you pack your bag each morning, do you have a process to make sure that only the essential items are added?

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