

# **Essentialism by Greg McKeown | Book Summary by Paul Minors**

# INTRODUCTION

## Who is this book for?

*Essentialism* by Greg McKeown is a must read for people interested in productivity and getting more done. It's a real eye-opener which challenges you to think about what's important and how you're spending your time. The book guides you through the process of saying "no" to the "trivial many" so you can focus more on the "essential few".

## About the author

English born Greg McKeown is a author, teacher, consultant and speaker. He studied at Stanford University and holds an MBA. His passion is living as an Essentialist and leading others to do the same. McKeown is hugely influential and has spoken in front of companies such as Apple, Google, Facebook and Twitter. The Harvard Business Review considers McKeown one of their most popular bloggers.

## In this summary

We'll begin this summary with a brief outline of what McKeown means when he describes living life as an Essentialist. Then we'll move on to discuss his 4-part process of becoming an Essentialist. Part 1; Essence, is all about mindset. Part 2; Explore, is about learning and discovery. Part 3: Eliminate is about getting rid of the non-essential and finally Part 4: Executor, is all about how to use the newly-discovered time you now have.

# BOOK SUMMARY

## What is an Essentialist?

McKeown describes the Essentialist lifestyle as living not by default but by design. This means that rather than simply reacting to events and making choices by default, an Essentialist will be disciplined and systematic in creating a lifestyle and make their decisions based on this. Essentialist are able to recognise that some things in life are more important than others, will remove all obstacles and will have the ability to eliminate everything that is not essential.

It's about making clear decisions and having a choice in what is important and what isn't important in your own life.

*"If you don't prioritize your life, someone else will"*

## 1. ESSENCE: IT'S ALL ABOUT MINDSET.

Too often we hear others (or ourselves) saying "I have to," "it's all important," or "I can do both." We are continuously encouraged to multi-task and juggle as many things as possible.

However, this is exactly the attitude that McKeown wants us to learn to reject. These aren't overwhelming truths, not everything is important and you don't have to do both.

Instead, McKeown suggests that we replace these notions with what he calls his three core truths:

- "I choose to."
- "Only a few things really matter."
- "I can do anything but not everything."

By changing our mindset and pursuing these three truths, we will be freed from the trivial non-essential and have the ability to pursue the truly important.

## **You have the ability to CHOOSE**

McKeown explains that the key to becoming an Essentialist is to acknowledge that you have a choice. It's completely individual, and totally up to you. You have the power to make choices and without that awareness, you cannot be an Essentialist.

*"When we forget our ability to choose, we learn to be helpless. In turn, we surrender our power to choose. That is the path of the Nonessentialist."*

Not only do you need to acknowledge that by making choices, you have power, but McKeown describes the Essentialist as someone who celebrates their right to choose. An Essentialist will never surrender the power of choice by allowing others to make choices for us.

## **Almost everything is unimportant**

A key in becoming an Essentialist, McKeown explains, is to sit back and spend time exploring your options. Don't assume that there's only ever one option.

Investing a little bit of extra time is going to pay off, because McKeown points out that some things are significantly more important than others, and recognising this is key.

*"An Essentialist, in other words, discerns more so he can do less."*

## **Make a choice: which problem do you want?**

When making choices, especially the more difficult ones, it's easy to fall into the trap of assuming that you have to 'give something up.' The negative perspective on this is that by doing less, you're not having as much of a reward. However, McKeown encourages Essentialist to perceive these situations as a positive choice, rather than making a decision based on giving something up, an Essentialist will make their decision based on what they want to really put all of their time and effort into; "go big on."

Simply changing your thought process and approach to making choices will have a significant effect.

*"Trade-offs are not something to be ignored or decried. They are something to be embraced and made deliberately, strategically, and thoughtfully."*

## 2: EXPLORE: BE CONSTANTLY LEARNING

*"Essentialists spend as much time as possible exploring, listening, debating, questioning, and thinking. But their exploration is not an end in itself. The purpose of the exploration is to discern the vital few from the trivial many."*

### **Give yourself permission to escape**

In this day and age, everyone seems to be time-poor and constantly juggling more than they can realistically handle. And this is one of the main obstacles preventing us from living life as an Essentialist. McKeown explains that you need to allow yourself some time and space to really detect what in your life is essential and what is trivial and can be discarded.

Allowing yourself this time and space is what McKeown is talking about when he says that Essentialists live by design, not default. The time and space is only available to you if you have designed your life to allow yourself this escape.

There are three key things that McKeown suggests you use your space to do:

1. Design - away from all the distractions, take the time to think and design your life
2. Concentrate - as much as using your time to schedule and focus on planning the essentials, it's also important to take time out to do nothing but think from time to time.
3. Read - remember to schedule time to sit down and read what McKeown describes as classical literature - avoid blogs, modern books and news during this sacred time.

### **Focus on what matters**

We have all felt lost and unmotivated at different points in our life. Often we are faced with too much information or have too many choices and you simply do not know what you need to focus on. Rather than making a choice and moving forward, we find ourselves stationary and stagnant, making no progress on anything at all. Or even worse, moving backwards.

McKeown encourages us to stop 'hyper-focusing' on minor details and start looking at the big picture. This is where we are going to make progress.

*"Discerning what is essential to explore requires us to be disciplined in how we scan and filter all the competing and conflicting facts, options, and opinions constantly vying for our attention."*

McKeown has the following tips to help you to focus on the bigger picture and stop hyper-focusing on small details:

- Keep a journal.
- Get out into the field. Get out there and fully explore the problem.
- Keep your eyes peeled for abnormal or unusual details.
- Clarify the question. "What question are you trying to answer?"

### **Allow yourself to play**

It's time to stop perceiving play as a time where you are neglecting your responsibilities, stop feeling lazy when your not 100% focused on work or the big picture. McKeown explains that play is a significant piece of the Essentialist puzzle because it provides a platform for exploration.

Play allows us to expand our knowledge and uncover a broader range of options, play allows you to see things in a way that you might never have if you didn't allow yourself the opportunity to play. Having time to play opens you up to meeting people in a different environment and making new connections. Play can be used as a platform to broaden perspectives and challenge assumptions. It's a time for imagination and can be where new ideas are born.

McKeown explains that play is also essential in managing your own stress. If you're feeling highly stressed, your creativity and productivity are immediately affected and the quality of your work and life will decrease. Allowing yourself the freedom to play provides you with an opportunity to re-set and re-energise.

*"Mine your past for play memories. What did you do as a child that excited you? How can you re-create that today?"*

### **Sleep and recover**

All too often we are heard complaining that there are not enough hours in the day, wishing that we didn't need to sleep as much so we could squeeze more in. Or we

simply go to bed far too late and get up far too early. McKeown explains that this approach is exactly what the Essentialists avoid. Sleep is not a burden, it is not a barrier to getting things done.

We need to shift our mindset and view sleep as a necessary tool. Without sleep we face burn out, a lack of creativity, productivity and our general quality of life decreases. Essentialist view sleep as a crucial part of the puzzle, and they will specifically design more time for sleep, acknowledging that with more sleep, they will actually have more energy and motivation, and as a result, get more done.

*"Sleep is what allows us to operate at our highest level of contribution so that we can achieve more, in less time. Sleep will enhance your ability to explore, make connections, and do less but better throughout your waking hours."*

### **HELL YEAH! Or no.**

This is potentially one of my favourite quotes from this book, or any book really.

*"No More Yes. It's Either HELL YEAH! Or No."*

McKeown explains his 90 percent rule as something that can be used in almost any situation. When faced with an important decision, give the option a rating, anywhere between 0-100. If it falls under 90 percent, discard and reject it. It's not worth your time and energy. Anything over 90 percent can be pursued. This will help you avoid getting stuck with things that only rate 50 or 60.

When faced with a new opportunity, McKeown recommends using this approach:

1. Write down on a piece of paper what the opportunity is. E.g. Speaking at an event.
2. Under the opportunity, decide on 3 key criteria that the opportunity would need to "pass" before you would consider pursuing. E.g. Audience of over 1,000 people or travel costs covered.
3. Write down the 'ideal criteria.' The best-case scenario. E.g. 5,000 people in the audience and you are to receive a speakers fee.

Now, if the opportunity doesn't meet your 3 key criteria, then you need to say no. But, if it also doesn't pass 2 out of 3 of your ideal criteria, then the answer should still

be no. This means that you can figure out which opportunities are truly going to benefit you and are essential.

### **3: ELIMINATE: GET RID OF THE NON ESSENTIAL**

The third section of McKeown's book is designed to help you eliminate all the non-essentials and free up some time and energy to focus on the things in your life that are vital.

Again, McKeown suggests you shift your approach, rather than asking yourself which things you should say yes to, ask yourself what you will say no to. This will help you to reveal your true priorities and uncover the things that you can easily discard.

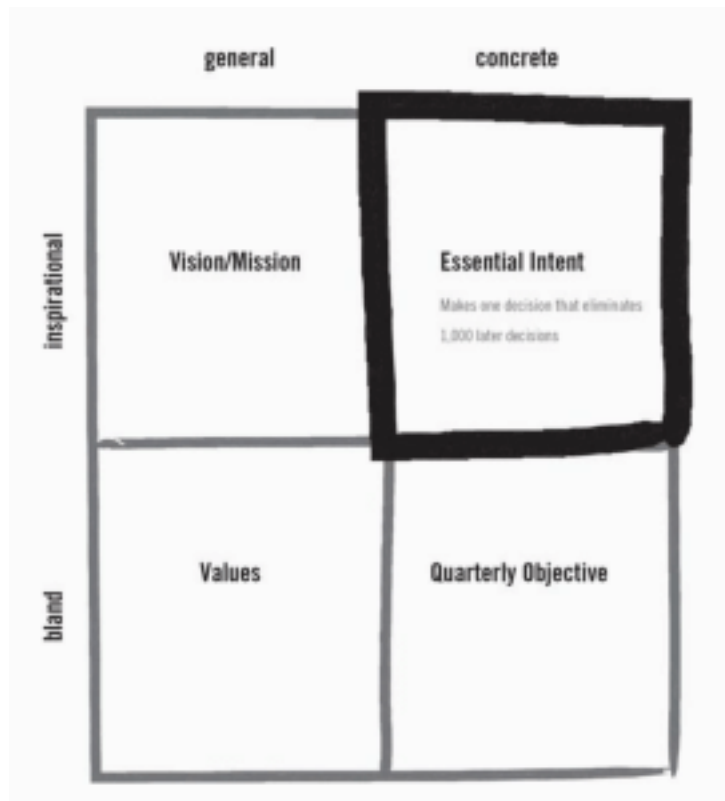
#### **Make decisions**

One of the first decisions McKeown recommends that you make, is to eliminate any activity that doesn't align with or support your big picture goals.

McKeown explains that in the workplace, it can be particularly detrimental to have tasks and jobs that don't clearly align with the end goal. If you're part of a team but don't know what the team stands for or what your specific goals and roles are, you're likely to face confusion, stress and frustration.

Instead, by defining activities and roles in relation to the end goals, people have clarity about what is expected of them and are able to work to a higher standard.

## Essential Intent



What you need to apply to these activities, is essential intent. As defined by McKeown, essential intent is both inspirational and concrete in nature. It is able to be measured and brings meaning.

*"Done right, an essential intent is one decision that settles one thousand later decisions."*

The key question that you need to ask yourself is: "If we could be truly excellent at only one thing, what would it be?"

McKeown explains, that by asking yourself this question, you will be able to influence all future decisions.

It's not an easy task to create essential intent. McKeown explains that you really have to be brave, look deep inside and have the foresight to recognise what it is exactly that will contribute to you meeting your own expectations, to reaching your big picture goals.

McKeown explains that there are always going to be competing priorities, but we have to recognise this, and acknowledge that they are only a distraction, getting in the way of us realising our true intent. Eliminating them may be difficult, but it will be beneficial.

*"It is worth the effort because only with real clarity of purpose can people, teams, and organizations fully mobilize and achieve something truly excellent."*

### **'No' is powerful,**

How often do you find yourself saying yes, or agreeing to something you don't actually want to do. All too often, we say yes simply to avoid any further conflict. McKeown explains that as an Essentialist, you need to master how to negotiate these moments, to be both brave and graceful. It's one of the most important skills McKeown teaches, but equally the most difficult to master.

McKeown explains that when you aren't aware of what is essential, it will be almost impossible, especially when put on the spot, to choose what activities are essential and which are not.

*"People are effective because they say no."*

By learning to say no to the non-essentials, as a result you free up your time and energy to say yes to the things that are truly essential, those that truly matter.

*"It is to say no—frequently and gracefully—to everything but what is truly vital."*

By taking on the Essentialist life, you have to accept that you're not always going to be the most popular. By default, people are often hurt or shocked when they are told no. But, McKeown explains that by learning to say no respectfully and gracefully will really help.

### **It's time to uncommit**

Sunk-cost bias is the term McKeown uses to describe what happens when we continuously invest our time, money & energy into a project that, deep down, we know is not going to make it or is already failing. We do this, because the money, time and energy we have already invested, is the driver.

This is where an Essentialist steps up, McKeown describes an Essentialist as someone who can acknowledge their own mistakes, and have the bravery to un-commit, despite whatever costs, monetary or likewise have been invested.

*"Don't ask, "How will I feel if I miss out on this opportunity?" but rather, "If I did not have this opportunity, how much would I be willing to sacrifice in order to obtain it?"*

## **Always be editing**

According to McKeown, an Essentialist, should always be editing. Editing means committing to the removal of anything unimportant, non-essential or completely trivial. And the key is to be strict. Many people assume that an editor simply removes and deletes. But, McKeown explains that an Essentialist editor will also add. It's not all about removing things, but also adding ideas and opportunities.

Here are a few ways McKeown suggests you approach the editing process:

1. CUT - perhaps the scariest part of the decision making process is cutting out your options, as humans, we default to trying to keep our options open. But, as McKeown points out, the word decision, actually means "to cut" or "to kill" in Latin.
2. CONDENSE - be as clear and concise as possible. Don't be lengthy with explanations and don't outbalance your effort to result ratio. McKeown explains that condensing does not equal doing more at once, but doing things with less waste.
3. CORRECT - an editor for a magazine or website will always be correcting, whether it be grammar, spelling or the general tone. Always be correcting, making adjustments, no matter how small, they add up.
4. EDIT LESS - as much as editing can be a useful tool, it's important to be restrained in doing so.

## **Set limitations and boundaries**

We may be predisposed to view limitations and boundaries as just that, limitations. There's a negative connotation that comes along with the words.

However, McKeown explains that a true Essentialist will actually be empowered by boundaries. It means that they are protected against the evils of distractions and people abusing their time. It provides them the freedom to work on their own tasks and activities without the constant worry of an interruption.

Feel free to set boundaries and limitations in your workplace. Close your office door so that people won't barge in, or explain that you won't be replying to emails or taking phone calls between 10 and 2. As long as you make it clear and set time limits, these boundaries will not hinder your work but allow you to thrive.

## **4: EXECUTER**

McKeown explains that someone who forces execution, is not practicing the Essentialist lifestyle. Execution should be effortless, and true Essentialists achieve this by eliminating the non-essentials and using their time in a productive manner.

### **What about the unexpected?**

McKeown explains that one of the key characteristics of an Essentialist is the ability to look ahead, to plan and prepare. An essentialist always needs to expect the unexpected and be continuously prepared for the unplanned or accidental. There are no guarantees in life, and as we are all aware, things don't always go to plan, you can't predict this, but you can prepare for it.

McKeown suggests adding a time buffer to tasks. For example, if you estimate a task will take you 2 hours to complete from beginning to end, add a 50% buffer to your allocated time slot. By allocating 3 hours instead of 2, you give yourself some flexibility and take of some pressure. And, if you're lucky enough to finish before the 3 hours are up, you can move something else forwards and get started on it early, or take a well-deserved break.

The other way you can prepare for the unexpected is to partake in what McKeown calls scenario planning. Ask yourself the following questions before you take on any task/opportunity.

1. When starting this project, what risks are you taking on?
2. Consider the worst-case scenario, how would the affect you?
3. Are there any social effects?
4. What is the likely financial effect?

5. What can you do to reduce these risks?
6. What can you do to strengthen financial and social resilience?

### **Remove obstacles**

Do you have an overpowering obstacle that is continuously having an effect on your progress? Is there something holding you back from your achievements? The key is to identify what the obstacle is and to remove it. There's no war around this, you have to eliminate the obstacle. McKeown explains that a non-essentialist will likely use the band-aid approach, rather than looking for the deeper obstacle that is truly preventing progress, they will look on the surface for things that are immediate or obvious and easy to eliminate.

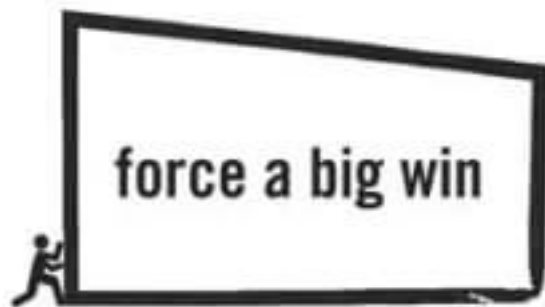
McKeown points out that you need to remember that sometimes 'productive' tasks such as research or email, can actually be the significant obstacle affecting your results. By checking emails too regularly, your facing regular interruptions and halting the flow of your more important work. Rather than having emails open all-day every day, try checking only twice a day.

### **Make progress**

We're often predisposed to trying to get everything done, and all at once. And we won't celebrate until we've completed everything. But, McKeown explains that Essentialists actually start small, with only a few small tasks, and they celebrate progress rather than the completion. Anything that is helping you progress closer to the goals are worthy of a small celebration.

There's evidence behind this, research has expressed that progress is the single most effective form of motivation. There's a reason that when trying to loose weight, you should weigh yourself a long the way to check you are making progress. Even if the goal is to loose 10kg, every single kg lost is worthy of a small celebration, and without those individual kgs, you would loose motivation quickly.

*"A small, concrete win creates momentum and affirms our faith in our further success."*



McKeown explains what he calls the “minimal viable progress” method. In using this method, when you approach a task, ask yourself; “What is the smallest amount of progress that will be useful and valuable to the essential task we are trying to get done?” If there’s something small that you can achieve right now, that will help you progress just a little but further, then it’s worth doing.

## **Routine is important**

*"The Essentialist designs a routine that makes achieving what you have identified as essential the default position. Yes, in some instances an Essentialist still has to work hard, but with the right routine in place each effort yields exponentially greater results."*

McKeown explains that having a secure and well thought-out routine is an essential part of removing obstacles. Having routine will encourage work on the essentials, allowing you to focus on these. If you lack any kind of routine, then the non-essential become more prominent and we are easily distracted by these. Having a consistent routine will allow us to automate these essential tasks and prevent interruptions.

Research shows that up to 40% of the decisions and choices we make are actually unconscious. McKeown explains that this fact can be used both to our advantage and to our disadvantage. It does mean that we have the ability to create routines and skills that will become instinctive. However, if we allow ourselves to develop routines that are unproductive and focus on the non-essential, we are in trouble.

McKeown has 5 key tips to ensure that you are focusing on and developing the right routines:

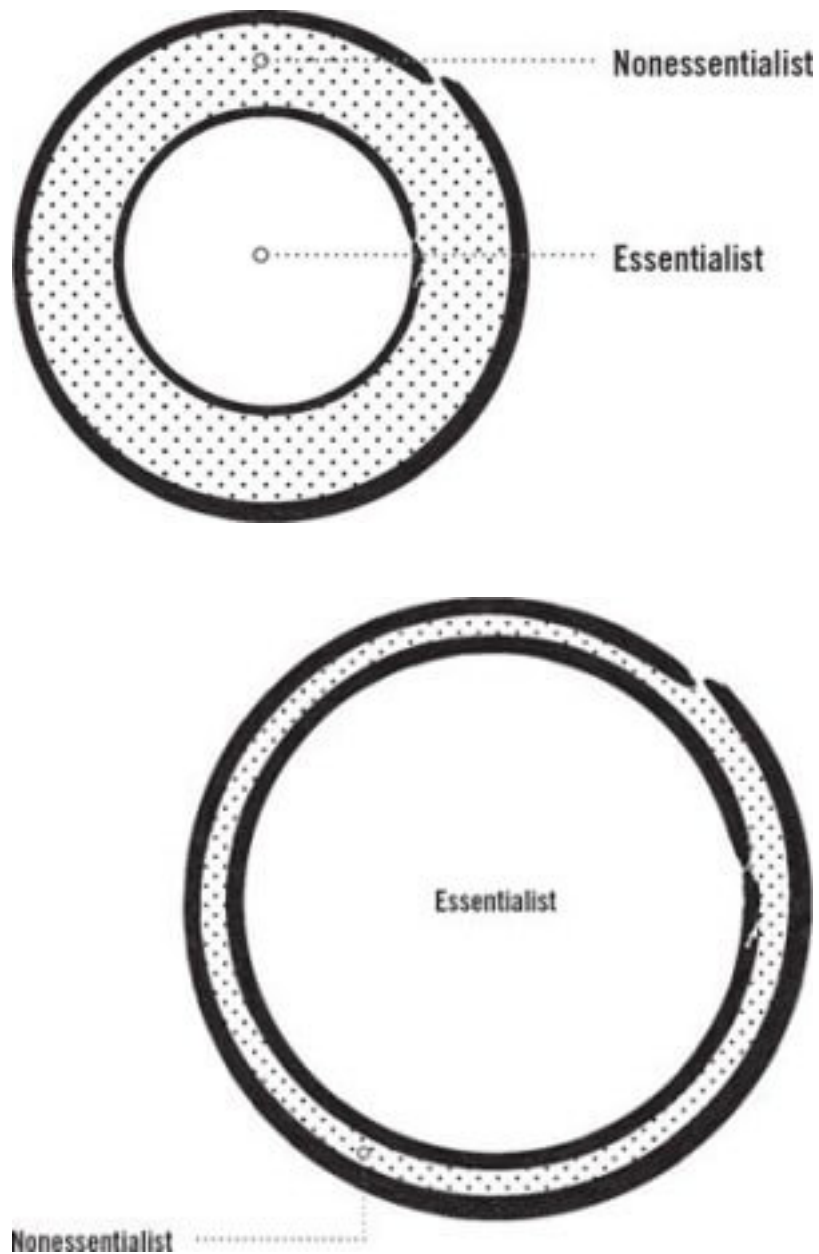
1. Overhaul your triggers - change what triggers mean to you, prompting you to do something productive instead.
2. Create new triggers
3. Always do the most important thing first
4. Have different routines to create variety - different ones for different days of the week
5. Tackle your routines one at a time.

## **So what is important now?**

*"To operate at your highest level of contribution requires that you deliberately tune in to what is important in the here and now. Every second spent worrying about a past or future moment distracts us from what is important in the here and now."*

## Be an Essentialist

McKeown explains that there are two ways you can think about being an Essentialist. Firstly, Essentialism is something you do when you can. Secondly, Essentialism is something that you are. The second way of thinking is preferred, it's encourages incorporating the key characteristics of Essentialism into your life and creating a lifestyle. Let it become who you are, not just something you do occasionally.



*"If you take one thing away from this book, I hope you will remember this: whatever decision or challenge or crossroads you face in your life, simply ask yourself, "What is essential?" Eliminate everything else."*

# CONCLUSION

## Key Takeaways

- Change your mindset
- Remember, you have the ability to choose what you focus on
- Almost everything is unimportant
- Make a choice: what problems do you want?
- It's about living by design, not by default
- Be constantly learning, growing, discovering
- It's either a HELL YEAH! or a no. If you're not super passionate about something, you don't have to do it.
- Use no to your power, just be graceful when you reject opportunities.
- Be constantly editing.
- Eliminate the non-essential
- Routines are crucial
- Always expect the unexpected, be prepared.

## Further Reading

It is worth checking out Leo Babauta's book; [The Power of Less](#). A guide on how to de-clutter your life and work to create more time for the important things. Leo explains how identifying the essential aspects of your life and eliminating all of the non-essentials can allow you to focus on goals and aspirations that can continue to change your life for the better. We live in a world that is fast-paced and very-full, this book helps show you that slowing down and having less can actually be beneficial. You should also have a read of [Minimalism: Live a Meaningful Life](#) by Joshua Fields Milburn & Ryan Nicodemus

*Zen to Done* is Leo Babauta's response to two of the best and most popular productivity systems; David Allen's *Getting Things Done* and Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Successful People*. Allen and Covey's books have been summarised already on my site, Leo Babauta's guide is an interesting and new take on the two systems, taking the best concepts from each and creating what Leo Babauta describes as 'The Ultimate Productivity System'.

*The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* is a really interesting read all about being more organised and intentional with what you choose to own and how this can impact your way of thinking and perspectives on life. This book is ideal for anyone who is looking to transform their life a little bit and get rid of the non-essential.

*Guidelines* is my eBook that summarises the main lessons from 33 of the best-selling self-help books in one place. It is the ultimate book summary; Available as a 80-page ebook and 115-minute audio book. Guidelines lists 31 rules (or guidelines) that you should follow to improve your productivity, become a better leader, do better in business, improve your health, succeed in life and become a happier person.

## Action Steps

- Download the full book on [Amazon](#)
- The next time you are approached with a new opportunity, consider McKeown's 90% rule, if it doesn't meet your criteria, then don't accept.
- Instead, McKeown suggests that we replace these notions with what he calls his three core truths:
- When your busy try replacing phrases such as "I have to" or "I can do both" with the following:
  - "I choose to."
  - "Only a few things really matter."
  - "I can do anything but not everything."
- Take a good look at your projects and commitments, consider what you truly want to focus on and work towards. Anything that is not serving your goals can be eliminated.