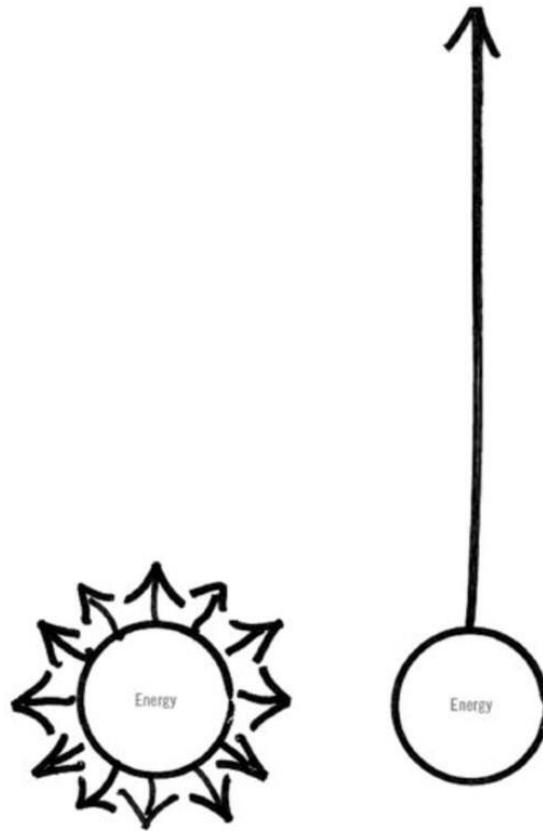


# Essentialism by Greg McKeown (2014, 260pp)

## A Summary

- Basic value proposition of Essentialism
  - Only once you give yourself permission to stop trying to do it all, to stop saying yes to everyone, can you make your highest contribution towards the things that really matter
- A more fitting description of Essentialism is Dieter Rams' design principle "Weniger aber besser" or "Lesser but better"
  - The way of the essentialist is the relentless pursuit of less but better, in a disciplined way (not one time nod)
  - It is about creating a discipline that you apply each and everytime you are faced with a decision about whether to say yes or whether to politely decline
- Essentialism is not about how to get more things done. It is about how to get the right things done.
  - It is not about doing less for the sake of less or eschewing mail / web and living like a hermit. That would be a backwards movement.
  - It is about making the wisest possible investment of your time and energy in order to operate at your highest point of contribution now by doing only what is essential
- The accompanying illustration captures the difference in the ways of the essentialist and non-essentialist.
  - In both images the same energy is exerted, but in the right instead of spreading it across multiple things, it is concentrated, and thus by investing in fewer things we have the satisfying experience of making significant progress in the things that matter most

*(See next page)*



- “If you don’t prioritize your life, someone else will”
- Paradox of success
  - Focus → Success → Demands by all on our time and energies
  - → leads to distractions → leads to defocus
  - Undermining very clarity that led to our success in the first place
- There are 4 parts to the book Essentialism
  - Essence : core mindset of the Essentialist
    - Outlines the 3 realities which make essentialism possible
  - Explore : Discern the vital few from the trivial many’
  - Eliminate : Cut out the trivial many
  - Execute : Do the vital few effortlessly

## I. Essence : core mindset of an Essentialist

- 3 realities that make essentialist thinking relevant and possible
  - Individual choice : we can choose how to spend our time and energies. Without choice there are no trade-offs
  - Noise : almost everything is noise, and very few things are exceptionally valuable
  - Trade-offs : you cant have it all or do it all. Hence stop asking “How can I do it all?” and ask “Which problem do I want to solve?”
- Hence the three deeply entrenched assumptions have to be replaced with new realities
  - I have to do → I choose to do
  - These are all important → Only a few things really matter
  - I can do both → I can do anything but not everything
- Joseph Juran in his *Quality-Control Handbook*, suggested the ‘law of the vital few’. His observation was that you could massively improve the quality of a product by resolving a tiny fraction of the problems.
  - Warren Buffett, 90% of wealth comes from 10 investment decisions
    - “Our investment strategy borders on lethargy”
  - Relationship between Effort and Results is non-linear. Certain efforts produce disproportionate results.
  - To summarize; the essentialist thinks almost everything is non-essential. As opposed to the non-essentialist, who views every opportunity as equal, the essentialist is continuously distinguishing the vital few from the trivial many
- “A strategy (in life or business) is not sustainable unless it involves trade-offs” – Michael Porter. That is why straddled strategies invariably fail.
- David Sedaris : Four-burner stove analogy where each of the burners stands for family, friends, work and health. To be successful, you have to cut off one of the burners. To be really successful, you have to cut off two. Trade-offs matter for success.

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

## II. Explore : discern the vital few from the trivial many

- To discern what is truly essential, we need space to think, time to look and listen, wisdom to play, rest, sleep and refresh, and the discipline to apply highly selective criteria to the choices we make
  - To a non-essentialist the above may seem trivial or even luxuries (who can take out time for thinking?)
- A paradox of essentialism is that the essentialist explores and evaluates a lot of options (more than the non-essentialist) before committing himself to one.
  - Because essentialists will commit and go big on only a few options or activities, they explore more options to ensure that they pick the right ones.
- Creating space
  - The faster and busier we get, the more we need to build thinking time into our schedule, and the more we need to build quiet reflection spaces where we can truly focus
  - Jeff Weiner, LinkedIn : empty 30-min slots totalling up to 2 hrs per day or Asana : no meeting wednesdays
  - (Cal Newport – be difficult to find, locate)
  - Bill Gates’ Think Week or if that seems tough set aside a Think Hour every day even where you read enduring, timeless work.
- Look carefully and identify the ‘So What’
  - Nora Ephron story of the lead “There is no school Thursday” – Journalism is not about figuring out the facts but about figuring out the point. It wasn’t enough to know the who, what, when and where; you had to understand what it meant and why it mattered. The best journalists do not simply relay information but in discovering what really matters to people. The same principles applies to our work too.
  - Listen carefully in conversation; what is unspoken is sometimes as important
- Sleep : Protect the Asset. One more hour of sleep means several more hours of higher productivity (do less but better through

waking hours). Sleep also enhances our ability to remember, learn and make connections.

- 10,000 hr rule example of violinists. After deliberate practice, the next thing that mattered was sleep
- Sleep affects our ability to discern the vital few, and our ability to prioritize.
- How to become more selective in the choices we make – put the decision to an extreme test. Say yes, if you are totally and utterly convinced. Anything else gets a thumb down. “If the answer isn't a definite yes, then it is a no!”
  - Apply this to all aspects – interviews of candidates etc. Of course, applying highly selective criteria involves a trade-off – that you pass down seemingly good options to wait for the perfect one. Sometimes the perfect option may not come.
  - The benefits of an ultra-selective approach is that you will consider fewer options – when your selection criteria are very broad, you will find yourself committing to many options. Thus it takes discipline and some pain to have tough criteria that eliminate many options, but this will enable you to make decisions consciously, logically and by design, not by default.
- Here is a simple systematic process to apply selective criteria to opportunities that come your way.
  - First, write down the opportunity
  - Second, write down 3 minimum criteria, the options would need to pass to be considered
  - Third, write down 3 ideal or extreme criteria, that the option would have to pass to be considered
  - The opportunity should pass all 3 minimum criteria and at least 2 of the 3 extreme criteria.

### III. Eliminate : How do we cut out the trivial many?

- The killer question while evaluating what activities to eliminate (or what things to throw) – if I did not have this opportunity or product, how much would I be willing to pay to acquire it?
  - This will also help overcome sunk-cost bias

- Remember saying no to opportunities (even good opportunities) is hard, but keep in mind that anytime you say no to a non-essential, you are saying yes by default.
- Always ask yourself, what will you say no to? This will help you uncover your true priority.
- How do we achieve clarity of purpose in our teams and in our personal endeavours?
  - One way is to decide on an essential intent for our vision
    - It is inspirational (as opposed to bland) and concrete (as opposed to general)
      - NASA : To put a man on the moon and get him back safely by end of the decade
      - UK Digital Champion : To get everyone in UK online by the end of 2012
    - How do we craft a statement of purpose that is concrete and inspiring, meaningful and memorable? Ask yourself:
      - If we could be excellent at any one thing, what would it be?
      - How will we know when we're done?
    - A true essential intent is one that guides your greater sense of purpose, and helps you chart your life's path. Creating an essential intent is hard – at a personal level you have to ensure that your essential intent enables you to do the work you love, taps your talent and meets an important need in the world, thereby leading to your highest point of contribution – yet it is worth it. Because only with real clarity of purpose will individuals, teams and organizations achieve something truly excellent.
  - Say No a lot : the point is to say no to the non-essentials so we can say yes to the things that matter
    - Keep in mind that you can say no without using the word 'no' : options are
      - awkward pause,
      - “no, but later or somebody else...”
      - let me come back after checking and then saying no (no in 2 stages)
      - or to your boss “Yes, but what should I deprioritize”, Y

- You are welcome to do \_\_, I will do \_\_  
(indicates your willingness to do, but only \_\_)
- Understand that saying ‘no’ trades popularity for respect : Paul Rand and Steve Jobs
- Remember that a clear no can be more graceful than a non-committal yes. As Tom Friel of Heidrick says “we need to learn the slow yes and the quick no”
- To eliminate non-essential activities, tasks at work or commitments in personal life, in a low-risk way, do a reverse pilot.
  - Stop doing a certain activity for a week or more. If no one comes back after a few weeks or so, then you can assume that you can safely drop something.
- Great editors of books, films use principle of deliberate subtraction to add life to the ideas, plot, setting and characters
  - Eliminate multiple or meaningless activities or words with one or meaningful activity or word.
  - Alan Williams essay on “What is an Editor?” – Editor asks 2 basic questions
    - Are you saying what you want to say?
    - Are you saying it as clearly and concisely as possible
- Set boundaries – they are often a source of liberation (example of children running around in a park with fence)
  - No work after 6; no email checking during weekends, Sabbath, Sunday as sacred day etc.
- The root word of decision is *cis*, meaning to kill (also seen in incisive, scissors or *cide* – suicide etc)
  - To decide is to kill other options

#### IV. Execute : how can we execute the vital few effortlessly

- Plan buffers – time or space
  - Assume a worst-case scenario always and plan for it : Amundsen’s extreme preparation
  - Be aware of the planning fallacy : people always underestimate how much time a task will take, even if they have done it previously.

- Identify the ‘herbie’ or the constraint and work to speed it up : from The Goal by Eliyahu Goldratt
  - One option is to not worry about making your herbie perfect. Maybe 90% is fine.
- Create small wins, and a feeling of everyday progress
  - As is said in Silicon Valley, “done is better than perfect”
  - Minimum viable product
    - What is the simplest possible product that will be useful and valuable to the intended consumer?
      - Keep in the mind that the original iPhone didn’t have cut and paste!
- When you plan, start early and small
  - Often 10 mins invested very early on can save you 2-3 hrs of work at the last min or improve your project immensely
  - Use this 10 mins to identify data needs for example and ask for that...
  - Start a file with ideas on the topic / conference 6 months before the deadline : Initially just invest 4-5 mins, just jot down some ideas and close the file; but you have begun
  - One idea : when you schedule a call or meeting in advance, type out main objectives for the meeting, so that on the morning of the meeting, you can refer to them for making talking points. That way you don’t have to plan the entire agenda.
- Build critical activities into a routine – plan a specific time for it – calendarization
  - An essentialist designs a routine that enshrines what is essential, making execution almost effortless, making essential the default position.
  - Routine is one of the most easiest ways to overcome obstacles : instead of constantly pursuing the essential, it will now happen without us having to think about it
    - We don’t have to expend precious energy prioritizing it every day.
    - “We already have too much to think about. Why not eliminate some of them by establishing a routine?”
    - Do the most difficult things first in the day
    - Jack Dorsey schedule : Monday – management meetings, Tuesday – product development, Wednesday – marketing etc. Thu – developers and

partnerships, Fri – culture. This routine helps him to focus his energies on a single theme each day instead of being pulled in two directions.

- Start with scheduling or building one routine and then move on to others
- Jeff Weiner : A CEO's job is doing fewer things better
  - Peter Thiel : extreme empowerment : Everyone should have 1 single priority in their role and focus on that exclusively (did this at Paypal)
    - Clarity is the key to empowerment : everyone is clear abt what they are expected to contribute, and what everyone else is contributing
- The Essentialist Executive is ridiculously selective in hiring, debates until he establishes an essential intent, goes for extreme empowerment (Thiel Approach), communicates clearly without resorting to generic terms or jargon, checks in often to reward small wins, remove obstacles and measure progress
- Focus on the now – mindfulness / beginner's mind
  - Figure out what is important right now (especially if you are faced with multiple things fighting for attention)
    - Get the future out of your head – write down the activities and schedule them; then move on to the present
- Make Essentialism an all-encompassing approach to living, not one more thing to do. Be an essentialist, not someone who does essentialism as one more thing in their lives.