



The Power of Small Wins - ‘Essentialism’ (extract) - Greg McKeown (2014)

“When we start small and reward progress, we end up achieving more than when we set big, lofty, and often impossible goals.” – Greg McKeown

The way of the Nonessentialist is to go big on everything: to try to do it all, have it all, fit it all in. The Nonessentialist operates under the false logic that the more he strives, the more he will achieve, but the reality is, the more we reach for the stars, the harder it is to get ourselves off the ground.

The way of the Essentialist is different. Instead of trying to accomplish it all—and all at once—and flaring out, the Essentialist **starts small and celebrates progress**. Instead of going for the big, flashy wins that don’t really matter, the Essentialist pursues small and simple wins in areas that are essential.

Nonessentialist

- Starts with a big goal and gets small results
- Goes for the flashiest wins

Essentialist

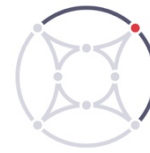
- Starts small and gets big results
- Celebrates small acts of progress

... When we want to create major **change** we often think we need to lead with something huge or grandiose, like the executive I knew who announced with great fanfare that he had decided to build his daughters an elaborate dollhouse—but then, because his visions for it were so large and ambitious, abandoned the project as too burdensome. There is an appealing logic to this: that to do something big we have to start big. However, just think of all of the “big”, hyped-up initiatives in organizations that never ended up amounting to anything—just like that executive’s dollhouse.

Research has shown that of all forms of human motivation the most effective one is progress. Why? Because a small, concrete win creates momentum and affirms our faith in our further success. In his 1968 Harvard Business Review article entitled:

“One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?”

among the most popular Harvard Business Review articles of all time, **Frederick Herzberg** reveals research showing that the two primary **internal motivators** for people are **achievement** and **recognition** for achievement.



*“Everyday progress — even a small win can make all the difference in how people feel and perform. Of all the things that can boost emotions, motivation, and perceptions during a workday, the single most important is **making progress in meaningful work**” - Amabile and Kramer*

Instead of starting big and then flaring out with nothing to show for it other than time and energy wasted, to really get essential things done **we need to start small and build momentum**. Then we can use that momentum to work toward the next win, and the next one and so on until we have a significant breakthrough—and when we do, our progress will have become so frictionless and effortless that the breakthrough will seem like overnight success. As former Stanford professor and educator Henry B. Eyring has written, *“My experience has taught me this about how people and organizations improve: the best place to look is for small changes we could make in the things we do often. There is power in steadiness and repetition...”*

We have a choice. We can use our energies to set up a system that makes execution of goodness easy, or we can resign ourselves to a system that actually makes it harder to do what is good... *The key is to start small, encourage progress, and celebrate small wins.*

Activity

1. FOCUS ON MINIMAL VIABLE PROGRESS

“What is the *smallest amount* of progress that will be useful and valuable to the essential task we are trying to get done?”

2. DO THE MINIMAL VIABLE PREPARATION

“What is the *minimal amount* I could do right now to prepare?”

3. VISUALLY REWARD PROGRESS

How can you break the bigger goal into *small steps* that you can celebrate as you go?