



TEL EPISODE #020:

Getting Things Done with David Allen

Show Notes: <http://www.theelpodcast.com/tel-020-getting-things-done-david-allen/>

Welcome to The Entrepreneurs Library, the only book-centric podcast that reviews all the top-selling business books and shares author's perspective, firsthand. This is your resource to finding the next great book that will enable you to grow personally and professionally. Welcome your host, Wade Danielson.

WADE: Thank you for joining us on The EL. Today we have David Allen, author of Getting Things Done. Welcome, David, and thank you for joining us on The Entrepreneurs Library.

DAVID: Happy to be here, Wade. Thanks.

WADE: Will you take just a moment to introduce yourself and tell us just a little bit about you personally?

DAVID: Well, let's see. I wrote a book called Getting Things Done after 25 years of doing the work that the book is about in my own consulting practice and then in the corporate training and coaching world. I have a small company, still doing coaching and training – around the world, actually. That's sort of my professional who I am and what I'm doing.

My wife and I live in Amsterdam; we just moved here from Santa Barbara, California. A change of venue, change of context. Still writing, still doing a lot of coaching myself and keynote speeches and workshops and etc.

WADE: Okay, great. Thank you for sharing that. Now let's jump right into your book, Getting Things Done, which was made available for purchase back in January of 2001. David, we're going to move quickly here, but here are some of the top questions that our listeners/readers would love to get answered.

The first one is, what was the inspiration behind writing Getting Things Done?

DAVID: I'd say it took me 25 years to figure out what I'd figured out. I actually started to cobble together this methodology as I was doing my own consulting and coaching work with entrepreneurs and business leaders and managers in my own network, with my own small little consulting practice. And I found things that really worked. I also wanted to find a model that really worked for everybody, so that it didn't matter either what level you were at or what kind of industry you were in, but it helped improve your condition and situation and your ability to focus and be clear and get more stability and control.

I was exploring all of those just for myself personally, discovered stuff that worked, and then started to find out "Hey, this works for everybody" and started to apply these principles. Then over time, just discovered "Hmm, well, it doesn't seem like anybody came up with the same model I did," and the model turned out to be pretty bulletproof. Meaning it worked for anybody no matter what.

I wasn't ready to go out there and write a book about something that I couldn't truly stand behind and know that it could endure the slings and arrows of critics and anybody out there finding holds in it. Really, after 20 or 25 years, I discovered it actually was unique; nobody else had really done it that way, and it was bulletproof. So I said "I need to write the manual."

I figured, let me write the manual and see if I can put me in a book and put this methodology in a book and see if I can then translate it that way so it could be actually distributed virtually. So that was really – it was kind of a perfect storm of various different reasons that I did write the book, but those were the main ones.

WADE: David, it seems like your book was one of the first as well that came out – I know people have been writing for a long time, but one of the first that came out on this topic as far as getting things done. Since then, there has been so many others that have come out on time hacking and getting things done and all that different kind of stuff. What makes your book different from others regarding the same topic?

DAVID: Well, for one thing, my book is relatively timeless, meaning the principles are as old as dirt. They tend to be true no matter who uses them, where, or when.

I've just been writing a re-up or an update of the book. Actually, none of the methodology has changed, no matter how digital the world became.

One of the things that it's unique about is that really, it's not about the tool. It's not about the tool or the equipment or anything. And a lot of the other things are focused on – and rightly so, “Hey, here's a cool tool” or “Here's great apps” or things that can do that. This is really more what's the principle you need to apply, and it is tool-independent. You need tools, absolutely, in order to be able to keep stuff out of your head and to keep yourself focused, which is a lot of what this is about, but it's somewhat timeless material, really, in terms of what the methodology is.

Also, I think the second thing that makes it unique is this methodology starts with where you are, not with where you should be. A lot of books and a lot of people say “You should be thinking about the big picture, you should think about goals, you should set your priorities,” etc. And all of that is really good stuff in its appropriate timing, when you have the ability to really do that.

What I've discovered, though, is that most people are so wrapped up around their current reality that it's out of control and overwhelming and that they don't feel the ability to really focus on what they need to focus on, that we need to then supply the tools and the methodology to get control of whatever it is that you're needing to get control of, and then at the same time, then be able to get people an opportunity to be able to then graduate that to another level and another level of game.

So I think that's what's different and that's what's unique about it.

WADE: Excellent, very good. David, this next one is my favorite part of the whole interview, and that is basically you being able to give our audience a deep dive of your book. Whether that's chapter by chapter or just section by section, will you take us through and really break down what your book's all about?

DAVID: Sure. I start out by talking about one of the old methods that really don't work very well, given the kind of world that we're in these days. The old ABC,

priority codes or daily to-do lists and things like that, they were valuable in their time, because in the early days of time management, the world was just waking up to the idea that you needed to actually structure your time or think about how you structured your time, that you actually had the freedom to do that and so you need to make smart choices. That's all understandable.

But in the world that we live in today, with 300 emails coming at you and all kinds of interruptions and all kinds of information and all kinds of change happening very rapidly, to try to over structure yourself in some artificial way just simply doesn't cut it. At the same time, you can't just let it go and not do anything. So there is a big need.

I spend some time talking about why we really need a new model and a new methodology to approach and address the kind of world that we're in today that takes it all into consideration and takes it all into without having to ignore any of it, how do I surf on top of it instead of feel buried by it?

Then I go into, in the very first part of the book, I give people an overview of the whole methodology. So if you're into "give me the cliff notes or the quick version of what the methodology is," the book is structured in three parts, and the first part really does that.

There's a chapter right in the beginning where I talk about the five stages or phases or steps that you need to engage in in order to get something under control. And when I say control, I'm not talking about control your life partner or control your boss or control your weather; I mean, good luck. I'm talking about having something under control, like your car or a meeting or your head or your email or your desk or your kitchen or your company. How do I get something under control? It turns out that there are actually five stages or phases we all go through in order to be able to really get something under control and to be able to make it work.

I cover in some detail those five stages, and each one of those techniques and those stages has its own techniques, its own tools, and its own best practices and worst practices. So I go through, for instance, the first stage is to be able to collect

the things that have your attention. If you walk into your kitchen, or if I walked into your company, what is it that's on your mind? What is it that's grabbing you? What is it that you've got either bugging you or bothering you or as an opportunity that's on your mind?

Because what you're looking for is what's not on cruise control? So I talk about that; that's a very powerful part of what this methodology is, is being able to identify those things. And that can take quite a while, but I walk people through here's what it looks like if you were going to do that. What are the tools, what are the practices about how do you collect stuff?

Most people have all the tools, and this is not really a new or foreign behavior. But what I describe in detail in the book is how to actually take this and make it much more explicit and much more let's say powerful in terms of how you actually apply that principle. Everybody listening to this right now has at some point felt overwhelmed and confused and sat down and made a list and felt more in control and more focused.

So if you reverse-engineered that like I did, figured out "how come that happens?", you'd never keep anything in your head the rest of your life. And I don't, because nothing changed in your world, and you felt more in control and more focused, except how you were engaged with your world changed. That's a big, big key to this whole methodology. But the first step and the first stage is a really important piece. So I spend some time on that, talking about how do I capture and collect the stuff that has our attention?

Then the second stage, and I identify that as how do I process the stuff that I've captured? Once I write down all these notes and once I get it out of my head, what do I need to decide about it? So then I go through what's the clarifying phase or stage or step? Because even though you have stuff on a list, you still need to decide, "Wait a minute, what am I trying to accomplish about that, and what's the very next action I need to take?" Those don't show up by themselves; that's a thought process you actually have to apply, so I describe that.

I also then describe Stage 3, which is how do you organize the results of that thinking? Once I've made the decision, the next step on this thing is a phone call I need to make, but I can't make the call right now; where do I park that? So that's essentially building categories to then park the results of the kind of executive thinking and decision-making you need to make about the stuff that has your attention.

Stage 4 is then how do I step back and reflect and review, and how do I engage with these lists and all of this stuff that I've collected and all the stuff that I actually have to do and have as options? We talk about the reflection or the review process, how do I build that in so that I feel comfortable about my choices, about what I do?

Stage 5 is then what do I do? How do I engage? How do I then make the appropriate choice out of all the options of calls I have to make, errands I need to run, stuff I need to talk to people about, things I need to handle. How do I step back and see that from the appropriate perspective and feel comfortable? For instance, if you only have 8 minutes and you don't have much brain power because you've been in six meetings that were brutal, then you don't want to try to pick up a call and talk to a key client or a key person in your life. You want to take 6 minutes and go water your plants, or you want to make a quick call and change a reservation you need to change.

As simple as that may sound, that's actually a very profound set of behaviors, to collect, to process, to organize, to reflect, and then to engage. That's actually how you get control of your kitchen, that's how you get control of your company, that's what you need to do at any time. So I go through that in some detail, at least describing what that model is.

Then I talk about once you have a project or once you have a situation, I then introduce people to what I call the natural planning model, which is how our brains naturally plan. And they do it automatically; it's how you go to dinner, it's how you get dressed, it's how you do all kinds of things. But the natural model is not the normal model. The natural model says "I have an intention, I have a vision of success. I then brainstorm all the potentially relevant data. I then organize that

into some coherent format. Then I take action on the first thing I need to do.” Pretty obvious, pretty commonsense. That’s not how most people plan.

So essentially, I take people through, how do I horizontally get control across everything across my life, everything from cat food I need to the strategic plan I need to write to the bank call that I need to make to my kid’s soccer game, etc. So the horizontal is very powerful to be able to get your arms wrapped around that.

Then there’s the vertical piece, which is take any one of those situations, if I need to expand or elaborate more on that and think it through in terms of planning, what’s a simple and informal way to do that back in the envelope that quickly can get that off my mind?

So the first part of the book is really a way for people to get a quick grasp of what this whole methodology is if you work to apply that. And by the way, as simple as those things sound, we’re not born doing any of that. You didn’t hop out of your mom and go, “Hi, what are we trying to accomplish? What’s the next step? Mom, is this yours or mine?” That’s something you actually have to learn. You actually learn this thought process, and it’s something that you actually do need to focus on and apply, because it does not happen automatically. Your brain does not automatically think that way. You actually have to get it to focus on those things.

So that’s powerful. People can catch that right away. But then I do Part 2, that says “Okay, if you buy into this idea, how would you actually go implement this? What would this really look like?” So Part 2, I actually walk people through the coaching process that I developed over 20, 30 years, and literally side by side, desk-side with some of the best and brightest people on the planet, I spent thousands of hours walking them through this process.

So I actually describe what that process is, and it’s literally “take this here, put this there, Step 1, Step 2.” So it actually walks people through, if you’re willing to and have the discipline and interest, it actually walks people through the process that you’d pay me big bucks to walk you through. You can do it, just check the book out of the library and it’ll walk you through it. So that has all of that detailed information in it.

Then the last part of the book is “Oh by the way...” Because a lot of people want the model; a lot of people want to know how to implement it. But I couldn’t resist saying “Yeah, but there’s a lot more to this than meets the eye.” There’s a lot of incredibly powerful and surprising stuff that happens once people actually start to implement these fairly simple behaviors that goes way beyond what you might think.

So what is next-action thinking and outcome thinking? How will that impact your life? How does that affect a company or a team or a family when you start to think that way? Very powerful. What happens when people actually don’t keep stuff in their head, but they make sure they capture any agreements and potentially meaningful stuff out into an external system that’s trusted? Whoa, man. A lot of very cool stuff that happens there.

So the last part of the book, if you made it that far, is “Oh, and here’s the between the lines.” That’s the short version of a very long story that got compacted into an easy-to-read and pretty fun book.

WADE: Thank you for that. I think the next question, what you just went through makes this question hard, because there’s a ton of great content and context throughout your book. The next question is, if the reader could only take one concept or principle or action item out of your entire book, what would you want that to be?

DAVID: Your head is for having ideas, not for holding them.

WADE: Excellent. That kind of leads into my next one, but I want to write that down real quick. I love to give the author a chance to brag on themselves and to give us a quote that they have from their book. I like the one you just said, personally, but to give us a quote from their book; something that they wrote that they thought was just powerful.

DAVID: Well, I think that kind of encompasses it. I don’t know, you can look at this through lots of different lenses in terms of what this is about. But I think it really

comes down to that, so I'll just have to repeat that again. Folks, your head is to be freed up to make intuitive decisions about your options, not to remember or remind them. Your head is not designed to remember or remind; it does not do that very well at all. Your head is designed to look at all your options and then make good intuitive choices based upon patterns you see and based upon lots of variables. But it's not designed to remember them.

That's not an exact quote, but that's a big key. That whole idea is one that if you catch that, that's a huge change in behavior for most all adults on the planet.

WADE: That is huge, and I appreciate you sharing that. We're running up to our last question, and that is if there was only one other book that you could recommend – and it doesn't have to be on entrepreneurship or anything like that necessarily, but if there was only one other book that you could recommend based on the way it changed your life, maybe created a paradigm shift, or the way it impacted you – what would that be?

DAVID: It's a small little book, very powerful, written by actually a fiction author who wrote a nonfiction book. It's called *The War of Art* by a man named Steven Pressfield. Very powerful book about how to understand why you tend to avoid the things that are most meaningful to you.

WADE: Gotcha. Very good. David, thank you so much for coming on. Before we depart, can you recommend the best way for our listeners to get more information on you and your book, *Getting Things Done*?

DAVID: Sure. Our website, gettingthingsdone.com. It's fun. We've reformatted it; it's easy to play, easy to hop in, and you'll see lots of cool ways to play and lots of opportunities there. So that's probably the best and easiest thing to do.

WADE: Okay, excellent. Thanks again, David.

DAVID: My pleasure, Wade.



WADE: Thanks again for listening in today. If you would like to get your hands on Getting Things Done or any of the other resources mentioned by David, just look at the show notes at TheELPodcast.com.

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