

The too difficult pile

It sits there, on your desk lowering at you.

It may not be on your desk, it may be a to-do list, on your PC or in your head, but the effect is the same – a dark cloud lurking, something to worry about – the things you keep putting off, and never seem to get round to.

And the more you don't get round to them, the worse it gets. To get out of this vicious circle, you need a new approach, and the first thing to do is face the enemy squarely – what's in that pile, and why is it there?

Now you're probably feeling very uncomfortable about looking at that pile, but this is where you make yourself a promise. You won't have to do anything about any of it now – just take ten minutes to see what's there, then you can go back to the things you like doing.

On that basis, you will be quite happy to spend a few minutes looking, and the first thing to look at is how things got there. There are normally two reasons why things end up on the pile. The first is because you don't like doing them - writing a report, for example.

The second reason is that you really do find them too difficult. Telling a member of staff that they are under-performing, making a sales call, or facing up to a conflict with a colleague. It's easier to play ostrich, and hope things will sort themselves out, or the problem will go away.

Now this can be an effective technique, if you use it consciously. Putting something on the "leave it for 2 weeks and see how things develop" pile can be a valid decision if you think that there is a reasonable possibility that time will improve or change the situation. Don't fool yourself, though! Some things are guaranteed to get worse the longer you leave them, so you must be honest in your assessment.

Take the pile, and sort it into the following categories:

Can do it, but I dislike doing it

Can't face it, though it will get worse if I leave it

Very hard – might improve if I leave it

Very hard – need help

If you still have some time left, the next stage is to make a plan for each item. Do it now, or make another appointment – this time for 20 minutes. Remember you still do not have to do anything with the pile – this is just planning.

"Can do, but dislike", is down to self-discipline, you may think, but why do you dislike it? If it's because you don't think you're very good at it, then a little learning or advice might help. If you find it boring, can you delegate it? Can you at least share some of the work with someone?

I know someone who hates report writing, and is not fluent on paper at all. He has to produce a regular quarterly report, which he sources from different parts of the organisation. He found a colleague who is very talented in this field, and she helped him produce a standard template, into which he pours all the information, sent to him in the tight format he requested. The report has become a standardised cut and paste process which he compiles with ease. When he has some major variation to include, he writes the minimum, and gets help from his colleague, who is happy to edit it for him.

If a report is on your pile, you may see it as one huge lump of work, sitting there. Break it down into pieces. Can any of those pieces be done by others? Are some of those pieces easy to do anyway? If they are, take them off the too difficult pile and schedule them into your week, or pass them on to others. By the time you've done this, what's left on the pile will have shrunk quite nicely. See if you can break it down further on your next visit. If you're really stuck, who could help or advise? Perhaps you only need to discuss options with someone. Planning in this way will enable you to break off more pieces and put them into your schedule, until the whole thing suddenly becomes very manageable, and doesn't feel too difficult any more.

If you have something on your pile that you cannot face, and will get worse if you leave it, then it's a good idea to find someone who can help you to plan a way forward. They may be an expert, or they may be someone you can trust who listens well. If you just talk the problem through, you may see the way to go, or you may be able to explore options – what would happen if I approached it this way or that? So your first step is to find that sounding board. Leave the problem on the too difficult pile, and make finding that person a priority. You could even allow yourself the faint hope that you may find someone else to deal with the problem. It's unlikely, but certainly worth exploring, and is a good spur to having that planning discussion.

We can treat both of the remaining categories as one, since they are both “very hard”, and you are likely to need help in both cases. If it's a skill you need, that is easily fixed. Either you find the time to acquire it, or you find someone else with the skill to do it. So if you need to prepare a complex spreadsheet, and you can barely spell Excel, then follow one of those two routes. Training can take many forms – a course, a book, a CD, whatever suits your diary and your learning style. Perhaps you could do a deal with a colleague – “You prepare this for me, and I'll sort out that presentation for you...”

If your problem is very hard by everyone's definition, then go the route of expert advice, or a good sounding board. The way forward may come from them, or by talking it through, you may find your own way, but the important thing is to take this first planning step, and not leave it on your pile, untouched.

As with the other items on the list, you are adopting the same approach. You do not try to eat the elephant whole. You break off small pieces, take them off the pile, and then go back for more. You promise yourself that you won't have to do anything too difficult – just small pieces that you can manage, and leave the rest on the pile.

With this step-by-step approach, you can reach the stage where you never have a “too difficult” pile again, because you break up tasks into manageable chunks as they arrive, so they never appear as too difficult!