

ESSENTIALISM BY GREG MCKEOWN | BOOK SUMMARY

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".

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

1. The Essentialist

The way of the Essentialist means living by design, not by default. Instead of making choices reactively, the Essentialist deliberately distinguishes the vital few from the trivial many, eliminates the nonessentials, and then removes obstacles so the essential things have clear, smooth passage. In other words, Essentialism is a disciplined, systematic approach for determining where our highest point of contribution lies, then making execution of those things almost effortless.

PART 1: ESSENCE: WHAT IS THE CORE MIND-SET OF AN ESSENTIALIST?

There are three deeply entrenched assumptions we must conquer to live the way of the Essentialist: "I have to," "It's all important," and "I can do both."

To embrace the essence of Essentialism requires we replace these false assumptions with three core truths: "I choose to," "Only a few things really matter," and "I can do anything but not everything." These simple truths free us to pursue what really matters.

2. CHOOSE: The Invincible Power of Choice

To become an Essentialist requires a heightened awareness of our ability to choose. We need to recognize it as an invincible power within us, existing separate and distinct from any other thing, person, or force.

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.

The Essentialist doesn't just recognize the power of choice, he celebrates it. The Essentialist knows that when we surrender our right to choose, we give others not just the power but also the explicit permission to choose for us.

3. DISCERN: The Unimportance of Practically Everything

The essentialist takes the time to explore all his options. The extra investment is justified because some things are so much more important that they repay the effort invested in finding those things tenfold. An Essentialist, in other words, discerns more so he can do less.

4. TRADE-OFF: Which Problem Do I Want?

Essentialists see trade-offs as an inherent part of life, not as an inherently negative part of life. Instead of asking, “What do I have to give up?” they ask, “What do I want to go big on?” The cumulative impact of this small change in thinking can be profound.

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

PART 2: EXPLORE: HOW CAN WE DISCERN THE TRIVIAL MANY FROM THE VITAL FEW?

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

5. ESCAPE: The Perks of Being Unavailable

We need space to escape in order to discern the essential few from the trivial many. Unfortunately, in our time-starved era we don't get that space by default—only by design.

Space to design – where can you go to escape from distractions so you can create the space you need to think.

Space to concentrate – when can you schedule time into your calendar for thinking about big picture stuff and all the things going on inside your head? Taking time out to do nothing but think can be extremely beneficial.

Space to read – when can you schedule time for reading classical literature (not blogs, modern books or the latest news).

6. LOOK: See What Really Matters

Have you ever felt lost and unsure about what to focus on? Have you ever felt overwhelmed by all of the information bombarding you and not sure what to make of it? Have you ever missed the point to something in your work or at home and not

realized your mistake until it was too late? If so, this next Essentialist skill will be immensely valuable.

Stop hyper-focusing on all the minor details and see the bigger picture.

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. Here are some tactics to help you focus on the big picture:

- 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?”

7. PLAY: Embrace the Wisdom of Your Inner Child

Play is fundamental to living the way of the Essentialist because it fuels exploration in at least three specific ways.

First, play broadens the range of options available to us. It helps us to see possibilities we otherwise wouldn't have seen and make connections we would otherwise not have made. It opens our minds and broadens our perspective. It helps us challenge old assumptions and makes us more receptive to untested ideas. It gives us permission to expand our own stream of consciousness and come up with new stories.

Second, play is an antidote to stress, and this is key because stress, in addition to being an enemy of productivity, can actually shut down the creative, inquisitive, exploratory parts of our brain.

So how can we all introduce more play into our workplaces and our lives? Mine your past for play memories. What did you do as a child that excited you? How can you re-create that today?

8. SLEEP: Protect the Asset

The way of the Nonessentialist is to see sleep as yet another burden on one's already overextended, overcommitted, busy-but-not-always-productive life. Essentialists instead see sleep as necessary for operating at high levels of contribution more of the time. This is why they systematically and deliberately build sleep into their schedules so they can do more, achieve more, and explore more.

In a nutshell, 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.

9. SELECT: The Power of Extreme Criteria

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

You can think of this as the 90 Percent Rule, and it's one you can apply to just about every decision or dilemma. As you evaluate an option, think about the single most important criterion for that decision, and then simply give the option a score between 0 and 100. If you rate it any lower than 90 percent, then automatically change the rating to 0 and simply reject it. This way you avoid getting caught up in indecision, or worse, getting stuck with the 60s or 70s.

Here's a simple, systematic process you can use to apply selective criteria to opportunities that come your way. First, write down the opportunity. Second, write down a list of three "minimum criteria" the options would need to "pass" in order to be considered. Third, write down a list of three ideal or "extreme criteria" the options would need to "pass" in order to be considered. By definition, if the opportunity doesn't pass the first set of criteria, the answer is obviously no. But if it also doesn't pass two of your three extreme criteria, the answer is still no.

PART 3: ELIMINATE: HOW CAN WE CUT OUT THE TRIVIAL MANY?

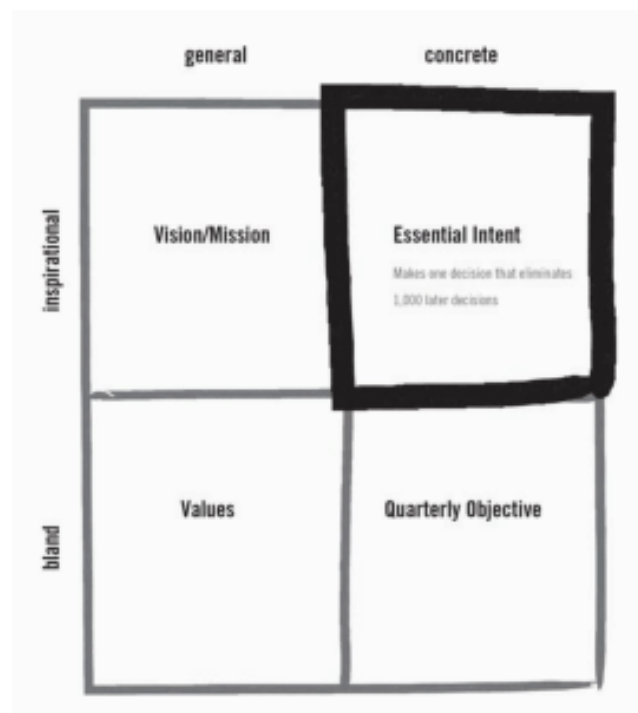
Part Three of this book will show you how to eliminate the nonessentials so you can make a higher level of contribution toward the things that are actually vital.

So once you have sufficiently explored your options, the question you should be asking yourself is not: "What, of my list of competing priorities, should I say yes to?" Instead, ask the essential question: "What will I say no to?" This is the question that will uncover your true priorities.

10. CLARIFY: One Decision That Makes a Thousand

The first type of nonessential you're going to learn how to eliminate is simply any activity that is misaligned with what you are intending to achieve.

When there is a serious lack of clarity about what the team stands for and what their goals and roles are, people experience confusion, stress, and frustration. When there is a high level of clarity, on the other hand, people thrive.



An essential intent, on the other hand, is both inspirational and concrete, both meaningful and measurable. Done right, an essential intent is one decision that settles one thousand later decisions.

An essential intent doesn't have to be elegantly crafted; it's the substance, not the style that counts. Instead, ask the more essential question that will inform every future decision you will ever make: "If we could be truly excellent at only one thing, what would it be?"

Creating an essential intent is hard. It takes courage, insight, and foresight to see which activities and efforts will add up to your single highest point of contribution. It takes asking tough questions, making real trade-offs, and exercising serious discipline to cut out the competing priorities that distract us from our true intention. Yet it is worth the effort because only with real clarity of purpose can people, teams, and organizations fully mobilize and achieve something truly excellent.

11. DARE: The Power of a Graceful "No"

Have you ever said yes when you meant no simply to avoid conflict or friction? Navigating these moments with courage and grace is one of the most important skills to master in becoming an Essentialist—and one of the hardest.

So why is it so hard in the moment to dare to choose what is essential over what is nonessential? One simple answer is we are unclear about what is essential. When this happens we become defenseless.

A true Essentialist, Peter Drucker believed that “people are effective because they say no.”

The point is to say no to the nonessentials so we can say yes to the things that really matter. It is to say no—frequently and gracefully—to everything but what is truly vital.

Essentialists accept they cannot be popular with everyone all of the time. Yes, saying no respectfully, reasonably, and gracefully can come at a short-term social cost.

12. UNCOMMIT: Win Big by Cutting Your Losses

Sunk-cost bias is the tendency to continue to invest time, money, or energy into something we know is a losing proposition simply because we have already incurred, or sunk, a cost that cannot be recouped.

A Nonessentialist can't break free of traps like these. An Essentialist has the courage and confidence to admit his or her mistakes and uncommit, no matter the sunk costs.

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?”

13. EDIT: The Invisible Art

Editing—which involves the strict elimination of the trivial, unimportant, or irrelevant—is an Essentialist craft.

An editor is not merely someone who says no to things. A three-year-old can do that. Nor does an editor simply eliminate; in fact, in a way, an editor actually adds. What I mean is that a good editor is someone who uses deliberate subtraction to actually add life to the ideas, setting, plot, and characters.

Cut – When making decisions, deciding to cut options can be terrifying—but the truth is, it is the very essence of decision making. In fact: The Latin root of the word decision—*cis* or *cid*—literally means “to cut” or “to kill.”

Condense – Condensing means saying it as clearly and concisely as possible. But to be clear, condensing doesn't mean doing more at once, it simply means less waste. It means lowering the ratio of words to ideas, square feet to usefulness, or effort to results.

Correct – An editor's job is not just to cut or condense but also to make something right. It can be a change as minor as a grammar correction or as involved as fixing the flaws in an argument.

Edit Less – Becoming an editor in our lives also includes knowing when to show restraint. One way we can do this is by editing our tendency to step in. A Nonessentialist views editing as a discrete task to be performed only when things become overwhelming.

14. LIMIT: The Freedom of Setting Boundaries

Boundaries are a little like the walls of a sandcastle. The second we let one fall over, the rest of them come crashing down.

Essentialists see boundaries as empowering. They recognize that boundaries protect their time from being hijacked and often free them from the burden of having to say no to things that further others' objectives instead of their own.

Whoever it is that's trying to siphon off your time and energies for their own purpose, the only solution is to put up fences. And not at the moment the request is made—you need to put up your fences well in advance, clearly demarcating what's off limits so you can head off time wasters and boundary pushers at the pass.

PART 4: EXECUTER: HOW CAN WE MAKE DOING THE VITAL FEW THINGS ALMOST EFFORTLESS?

While Nonessentialists tend to force execution, Essentialists invest the time they have saved by eliminating the nonessentials into designing a system to make execution almost effortless.

15. BUFFER: The Unfair Advantage

The Essentialist looks ahead. She plans. She prepares for different contingencies. She expects the unexpected. She creates a buffer to prepare for the unforeseen, thus giving herself some wiggle room when things come up, as they inevitably do.

One way to protect against the unforeseen is simply to add a 50 percent buffer to the amount of time we estimate it will take to complete a task or project (if 50 percent seems overly generous, consider how frequently things actually do take us

50 percent longer than expected).

You can also conduct scenario planning: (1) What risks do you face on this project? (2) What is the worst-case scenario? (3) What would the social effects of this be? (4) What would the financial impact of this be? and (5) How can you invest to reduce risks or strengthen financial or social resilience?

16. SUBTRACT: *Bring Forth More by Removing Obstacles*

The question is this: What is the “slowest hiker” in your job or your life? What is the obstacle that is keeping you back from achieving what really matters to you? By systematically identifying and removing this “constraint” you’ll be able to significantly reduce the friction keeping you from executing what is essential.

Essentialists don’t default to Band-Aid solutions. Instead of looking for the most obvious or immediate obstacles, they look for the ones slowing down progress.

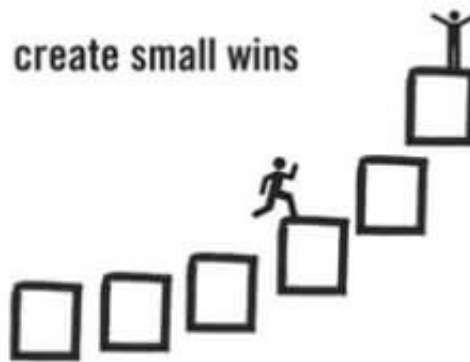
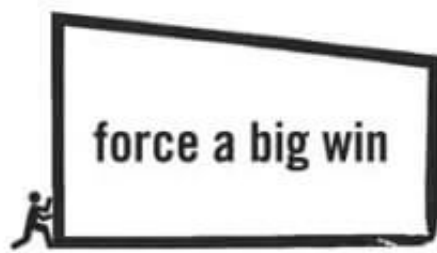
When identifying your “slowest hiker,” one important thing to keep in mind is that even activities that are “productive”—like doing research, or e-mailing people for information, or rewriting the report in order to get it perfect the first time around—can be obstacles.

To reduce the friction with another person, apply the “catch more flies with honey” approach. Send him an e-mail, but instead of asking if he has done the work for you (which obviously he hasn’t), go and see him. Ask him, “What obstacles or bottlenecks are holding you back from achieving X, and how can I help remove these?” Instead of pestering him, offer sincerely to support him. You will get a warmer reply than you would by just e-mailing him another demand.

17. PROGRESS: *The Power of Small Wins*

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.

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.



We can adopt a method of “minimal viable progress.” We can ask ourselves, “What is the smallest amount of progress that will be useful and valuable to the essential task we are trying to get done?”

Often just ten minutes invested in a project or assignment two weeks before it is due can save you much frantic and stressed-out scrambling at the eleventh hour. Take a goal or deadline you have coming up and ask yourself, “What is the minimal amount I could do right now to prepare?”

18. FLOW: The Genius of Routine

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.

Routine is one of the most powerful tools for removing obstacles. Without routine, the pull of nonessential distractions will overpower us. But if we create a routine that enshrines the essentials, we will begin to execute them on autopilot.

According to researchers at Duke University, nearly 40 percent of our choices are deeply unconscious.⁷ We don't think about them in the usual sense. There is both danger and opportunity in this. The opportunity is that we can develop new abilities that eventually become instinctive. The danger is that we may develop routines that are counterproductive.

To focus on the right routines 1) overhaul your triggers (change what triggers mean so they prompt you to do something else) 2) create new triggers 3) do the most important thing first 4) mix up your routines (e.g. have different routines for different days of the week) 5) tackle your routines one at a time.

19. FOCUS: What's Important Now?

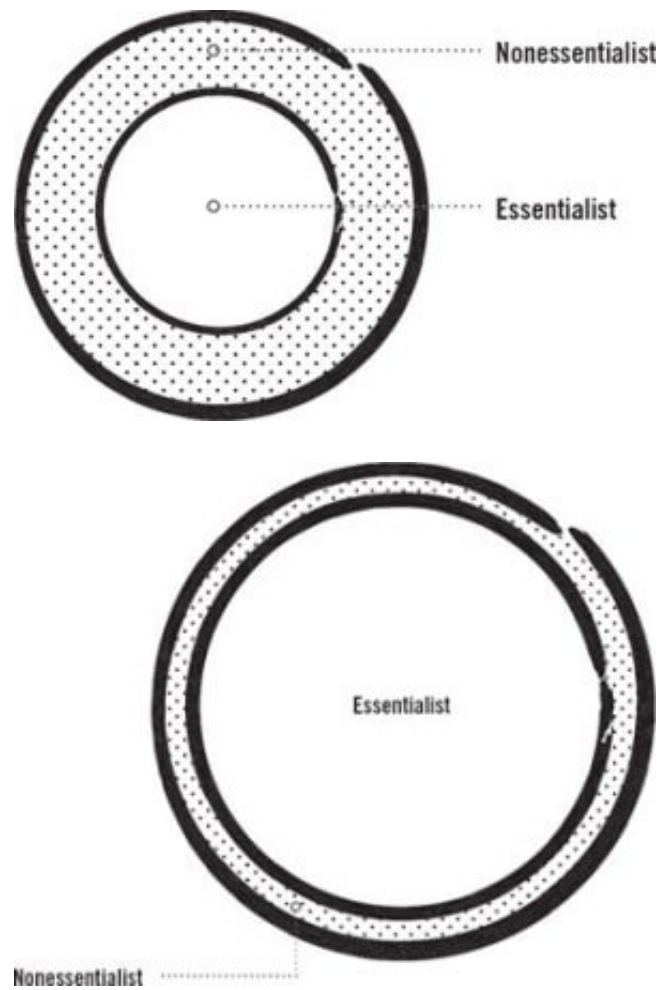
To operate at your highest level of contribution requires that you deliberately tune in to what is important in the here and now. Every second spent worrying about a past or future moment distracts us from what is important in the here and now.

When faced with so many tasks and obligations that you can't figure out which to tackle first, stop. Take a deep breath. Get present in the moment and ask yourself what is most important this very second—not what's most important tomorrow or even an hour from now. If you're not sure, make a list of everything vying for your attention and cross off anything that is not important right now.

Pay attention through the day for your own kairos moments. Write them down in your journal. Think about what triggered that moment and what brought you out of it. Now that you know what triggers the moment, try to re-create it.

20. BE: The Essentialist Life

There are two ways of thinking about Essentialism. The first is to think of it as something you do occasionally. The second is to think of it as something you are. In the former, Essentialism is one more thing to add to your already overstuffed life. In the latter, it is a different way—a simpler way—of doing everything. It becomes a lifestyle. It becomes an all-encompassing approach to living and leading. It becomes the essence of who we are.



You will gain confidence in your ability to pause, push back, or not rush in. You will feel less and less a function of other people's to-do lists and agendas. Remember that if you don't prioritize your life someone else will.

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.