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Professional Development

Organized? Who, me?

Don't you just hate those people who always have everything in place and know where it all is? Does your desk look like a war zone? Actually, that's an apt metaphor, because most of us battle paper pile-up daily.

Oh, we sometimes take a day to organize the mess, but a couple of weeks later it's back.

If it sounds as if I'm speaking from experience, I confess, it's true. It's because I have a low C behavioral style. People with a high C factor are the neat and tidy ones. Fortunately, I also have a high Aesthetic value, so I'm compelled to do something about it before the unsightliness causes my stress level to go into red alert.

So, when I got an email announcing a Teleclass to teach me how to get organized, I registered immediately. Here are some of the things I learned.

Have three stacking trays on your desk. The top tray is your In Box for mail and other things you need to go through and handle. The middle tray is the Out Box for outgoing mail, papers to send someone, or hand deliveries. The bottom tray is for papers that need to be filed. Once a week, not once a month.

When the class leader asked why the file tray should be on the bottom instead of the top, I said, "Because it will be the heaviest." I got a good laugh even though I was only half-kidding. She said it's because it will get full eventually, forcing us to file the papers.

Use a tickler file daily. The class leader likes the accordion folder type. I actually have a hanging tickler file drawer in a small file cabinet at my desk. I have heavy cardboard dividers with the names of each month printed on them. Each one goes in a hanging folder. In front of them are folders labeled 1-31. At the beginning of each month I replace last month's divider with the current one, placing it in front of the 1-31 folders.

Tickler files are necessary to keep tickets, announcements of events, and venue directions. They are also used for anything on paper you want to handle on a particular day. That could include answering a letter, calling someone about the subject matter, ordering supplies, or anything else that requires action.

We've all been told the secret to taming the paper tiger is to handle a piece of paper only once. So when you get something via email you print out, snail mail, or fax, decide right then what to do with it. You can act on it immediately, file it, or toss it. If it requires future action, decide what day you'll do it and put it in your tickler file in that date's folder. Check your tickler file every day.

Organize your file cabinet(s). I felt so good the day I did this. I had my filing cabinet behind my computer desk and had to walk around the cables to get to it. I wasn't using it much. I feel like I'll never look at something again once I file it, and that's why I pile to keep papers handy. I decided it was time to get over that.

I had someone help me move the file cabinet and exchange it with a bookcase so I could have easy access to it. I then cleaned out all the old files and threw away unneeded papers. Then I printed labels for all the folder tabs and created some new ones. No more handwritten folder labels for me.

One of our most challenging piles can be articles we intend to read. Someday. How quickly that mountain can grow!

My solution was to create an entire file drawer labeled "Resources." Whenever I get or print an article I may need for a future column, speech, book, or to share with a client, I put it in its folder. So whenever I need information on any subject, I know right where it is. And it's much less stressful than looking at a pile of reading material stacked on my desk.

I have to confess, my bottom tray is getting full. So I'm going to stop now and file or toss those papers.

Just as soon as I clean the toilet, which is still something I'd rather do.

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