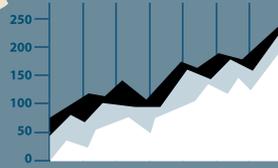


As Simple As ABC



Reorient your to-do list to unlock your productivity potential.

BY CURT STEDRON

New year, new you. The start of a new legislative session offers the chance for a fresh start. To do things differently this time around, to create new (ideally good!) habits and routines. To make better use of time with the hope of feeling slightly less depleted at the end of the session.

The challenge is one we all know: Accomplish more, in less time.

In the increasingly busy and chaotic world

of the legislature, staffers regularly face this paradoxical demand. Yet doing more with less requires not so much an increase in effort as a sharper focus on what truly matters, and a system of prioritizing tasks that makes that distinction crystal clear. In the words of efficiency expert Stephen R. Covey, “The key is not to prioritize what’s on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities.”

Many of us try to focus on our priorities by making lists. But the to-do list of a typical leg-



Curt Stedron is a program principal in NCSL’s Leaders Services and Legislative Training Program.

Flip Your To-Do Script

Reorient your to-do list from a vertical to a horizontal layout and you’ll see immediately what your priorities are.

A (Crucial)	B (Important)	C (Nice to do)	D (Delegate)	E (Eliminate or extend)
Complete bill draft and deliver to sponsor	Complete bill analysis before committee deadline	Update state agency contact list	Accompany school group on capitol tour	Drop by sponsored luncheon for free food
Complete and file bill summary before leaving for the day	Complete report for committee hearing in two days	Begin preparation, for interim	Print copies of presentation for colleagues	Unproductive standing weekly meeting
	Write talking points for next week’s event and deliver to legislator	Research anticipated issue		
		Revise news release template		



Manage Energy and Stress—and Do More With Less

When the American Society of Legislative Clerks and Secretaries met in Madison, Wisc., in September, Cindy Maher and Jamie Guite, with Leading Edge Coaching and Development, led an enlightening and entertaining workshop on managing energy and stress in a high-change, high-pressure environment. (Sound familiar?) The workshop was inspired by a Harvard Business Review article, “Manage Your Energy, Not Your Time,” by Tony Schwartz and Catherine McCarthy.

Resilience, Maher and Guite said, is critical for adapting to change and is affected by how much control we think we have over events—something psychologists describe as our locus of control. If our locus is internal, we make things happen; if it’s external, things happen to us. This in turn affects how we perceive change.

“People can cultivate positive energy by learning to change the stories they tell themselves about the events in their lives,” Schwartz and McCarthy write.

According to Maher, the connection between energy and productivity is this:

- ◆ All of us are required to do more with less. That usually means we work longer. The problem is that time is a finite resource; we only get 24 hours in a day. But energy is renewable.
- ◆ Energy (our capacity to work) is renewed through four wellsprings:
 - Physical: Exercise, eat well, take breaks during the workday.
 - Mental (our ability to focus): Avoid multitasking, tackle strategic or difficult tasks at the beginning of the day, learn to manage interruptions.
 - Emotional: Pay attention to your emotions (and their triggers) so you can better control them and feel happier at work. Make a habit of expressing appreciation for others.
 - Spirit: Ensure your work aligns with your values. Carve out time in every workday for what you do best and enjoy most. Allocate time and energy to other areas of your life: family, health, helping others.
- ◆ When we ignore our wellsprings, we’re like cars that run out of gas. We are less productive.

—Holly South

Holly South is a policy specialist in NCSL’s Legislative Staff Services Program.

islatiue staffer can be intimidating. Often, there are simply too many tasks for one person to accomplish in any given day. Those unfinished items inevitably spill over onto the next day’s list, and as the cycle repeats itself the accumulation of unmet goals can become paralyzing. Complicating matters are the limitations of the traditional to-do list: We tend to add items randomly, which gives us no real sense of their relative importance and, as a result, no clear order of execution.

Fortunately, there is a simple way to reorganize the traditional to-do list into a tool that clearly defines the most important tasks, while indicating the optimal order in which to tackle them. Productivity guru Brian Tracy calls it the ABCDE Method, which he outlines in his book “Eat That Frog!” His system lets you group tasks into five lettered categories, generating a visual road map for efficient execution. Each letter stands for a different level of importance:

- **A:** Very important; highest priority; serious consequences if not completed.
- **B:** Important; a priority; moderate or minor consequences if not completed.
- **C:** Nice to do; no negative consequences if not completed.
- **D:** Delegate; someone else can complete this task for me.

- **E:** Eliminate or extend; low priority; doesn’t really belong on the list.

The first step is to assign each of your tasks to a category. Tracy notes that the successful use of this method requires an ability to discern the essential from the important. Think of it like medical triage: Stopping the bleeding is essential, splinting a limb is important, administering aspirin is nice to do. Increasing productivity requires ruthless prioritization.

Next, flip your to-do list from vertical to horizontal. Now you have five columns across the page, one for each letter, rather than a random list down the page.

Instantly, your priorities become clear. A task that may have languished halfway down your traditional list is now clearly an “A” priority. And one that may have felt satisfying to cross off is seen to rate an “E”—unworthy of the time you would have spent accomplishing it. Your order

of execution also becomes obvious: Work from left to right, tackling “A” tasks before moving to “B” tasks.

But the greatest benefit of this method may be the way it makes a previously daunting list seem suddenly more manageable. Even the busiest staffers will find they have far fewer “A” tasks than “B” or “C” tasks. And three tasks in your “A” column will always be less intimidating than 14 tasks listed in the old vertical method.

In the legislative environment, increased productivity can sometimes seem like a unicorn—a mythical entity that people talk about but never see. Yet by reorienting the way we look at our priorities, we can transform our to-do lists from long and overwhelming to focused and achievable.

At its core, productivity is a function of knowing what is essential, and of doing those things first. Turns out, it’s as simple as ABC.