



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY SERIES

THE SUMMARY OF ESSENTIALISM

By Greg McKeown
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PART 1 • ESSENCE: What is the Core Mind-set of an Essentialist?

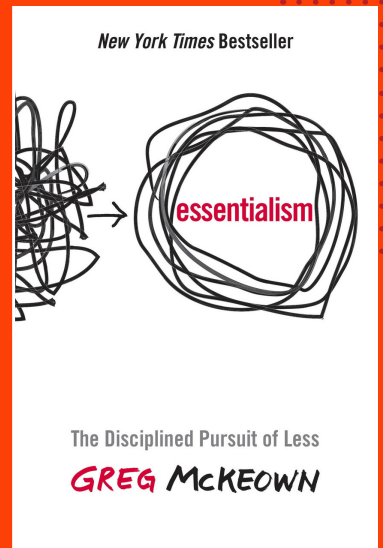
Essentialism is not a way to do one more thing. It is a different way of doing everything. There are three deeply entrenched assumptions we must conquer: "I have to," "It's all important," and "I can do both." Like mythological sirens, these assumptions are as dangerous as they are seductive. They draw us in and drown us in shallow waters.

We must 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."

Chapter 1 • The Essentialist

Essentialism is about pausing to constantly ask, "Am I investing in the right activities?" There are far more activities and opportunities in the world than we have time and resources to invest in. And although many of them may be good, or even very good, the fact

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is that most are trivial and few are vital. The way of the Essentialist involves learning to tell the difference—learning to filter through all those options and selecting only those that are truly essential.

Essentialism is not about how to get more things done; it's about how to get the right things done. It doesn't mean just doing less for the sake of less either. It is about making the wisest possible investment of your time and energy in order to operate at your highest point of contribution by doing only what is essential.

The way of the Essentialist is the path to being in control of our own choices. It is a path to new levels of success and meaning. It is the path on which we enjoy the journey, not just the destination.

If you don't prioritize your life, someone else will. Everything changes when we give ourselves permission to be more selective in what we choose to do.

Chapter 2 • CHOOSE: The Invincible Power of Choice

We often think of choice as a thing. But a choice is not a thing. Our options may be things, but a choice—a choice is an action. It is not just something we have but something we do. We may not always have control over our options, we always have control over how we choose among them.

Have you ever felt stuck because you believed you did not really have a choice? Have you ever given up your power to choose bit by bit until you have allowed yourself to blindly follow a path prescribed by another person?

Far too long, we have overemphasized the external aspect of choices (our options) and underemphasized our internal ability to choose (our actions). This is more than semantics. Think about it this way.

Options (things) can be taken away, while our core ability to choose (free will) cannot be.

The ability to choose cannot be taken away or even given away—it can only be forgotten. Choices are hard. By definition they involve saying no to something or several somethings, and that can feel like a loss.

When we forget our ability to choose, we learn to be helpless. When we surrender our right to choose, we give others not just the power but also the explicit permission to choose for us.

Chapter 3 • DISCERN: The Unimportance of Practically Everything

We have been taught from a young age that hard work is key to producing results, and many of us have been amply rewarded for our productivity and our ability to muscle through every task or challenge the world throws at us.

But are there limits to the value of hard work? Is there a point at which doing less (but thinking more) will actually produce better outcomes? It's easy to think of a job in terms of the ratio between time and reward. But what really counts in the relationship between time and results.

The overwhelming reality is: we live in a world where almost everything is worthless and a very few things are exceptionally valuable.

Many capable people are kept from getting to the next level of contribution because they can't let go of the belief that everything is important. But an Essentialist has learned to tell the difference between what is truly important and everything else. To practice this skill we can start at a simple level, and once it becomes second nature for everyday decisions we



can begin to apply it to bigger and broader areas of our personal and professional lives. To master it fully will require a massive shift in thinking. But it can be done.

Chapter 4 • TRADE-OFF: Which Problem Do I Want?

It is easy to see why it's so tempting to deny the reality of trade-offs. After all, by definition, a trade-off involves two things we want. Do you want more pay or more vacation time? Do you want to finish this next e-mail or be on time to your meeting? Do you want to finish faster or better? Obviously, when faced with the choice between two things we want, the preferred answer is yes to both.

But as much as we'd like to, we simply cannot have it all. We can try to avoid the reality of trade-offs, but we can't escape them.

Trade-offs are an inherent part of life, not 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.

When faced with a decision where one option prioritizes family and other prioritizes friends, health, or work, you need to be prepared to ask, "Which problem do you want?"

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?

To discern what is truly essential we need space to think, time to look and listen, permission to play, wisdom to sleep, and the discipline to apply highly selective criteria to the choices we make.

Ironically, in a Nonessentialist culture, these things—space, listening, playing, sleeping, and selecting—can be seen as trivial distractions. At best they are considered nice to have. At worst they are derided as evidence of weakness and wastefulness.

Chapter 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. Before you can evaluate what is and isn't essential, you first need to explore

your options. You must choose to create the space to explore and ponder.

For some reason there is a false association with the word focus. As with choice, people tend to think of focus as a thing. Yes, focus is something we have. But focus is also something we do.

In order to have focus we need to escape to focus. Here's a paradox for you: the faster and busier things get, the more we need to build thinking time into our schedule. And the noisier things get, the more we need to build quiet reflection spaces in which we can truly focus.

No matter how busy you think you are, you can carve time and space to think out of your workday. Whether you can invest two hours a day, two weeks a year, or even just twenty minutes every morning, it is important to make space to escape in your busy life.

Chapter 6 • LOOK: See What Really Matters

Journalism is not about the facts but about the point. It isn't enough to know the who, what, when, and where; you have to understand what it means. And why it matters.

We know instinctively that we cannot explore every single piece of information we encounter in our lives. 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.

Being a journalist of your own life will force you to stop hyper-focusing on all the minor details and see the bigger picture. You can apply the skills of a journalist no matter what field you are in—you can even apply them to your personal life. By training yourself to look for “the lead,” you will suddenly find yourself able to see what you have missed. You'll be able to do more than simply see the dots of each day; you'll also connect them to see the trends. Instead of just reacting to the facts, you'll be able to focus on the larger issues that really matter.

One of the most obvious and yet powerful ways to become a journalist of our own lives is simply to keep a journal.

Chapter 7 • PLAY: Embrace the Wisdom of Your Inner Child

The majority of us were not formally taught how to play when we were children; we picked it up naturally and instinctively. But as we get older something happens. We are introduced to the idea that play is trivial. Play is a waste of time. Play is unnecessary. Play is childish.

Play, which I would define as anything we do simply for the joy of doing rather than as a means to an end—whether it's flying a kite or listening to music or throwing around a baseball—might seem like a nonessential activity. But studies show play has the power to significantly improve everything from personal health to relationships to education to an organizations' ability to innovate.

Play doesn't just help us to explore what is essential. It is essential in and of itself. The value of play in our lives can't be overstated. It opens our minds and broadens our perspective. It gives us permission to expand our own stream of consciousness. 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. What did you do as a child that excited you? How can you re-create that today?

Chapter 8 • SLEEP: Protect the Asset

The best asset we have for making a contribution to the world is ourselves. If we underinvest in ourselves, and by that I mean our minds, our bodies, and our spirits, we damage the very tool we need to make our highest contribution. One of the most common ways people—especially ambitious, successful people—damage this asset is through lack of sleep.

We need to be as strategic with ourselves as we are with our careers and our businesses. We need to pace ourselves, nurture ourselves, and give ourselves fuel to explore, thrive, and perform.

Essentialists see sleep as necessary for operating at high levels of contribution more of the time. Why do



some give up their precious sleep so easily? Part of the reason is they subscribe to the false belief, as I did, that if they sleep less they will achieve more.

In reality there are only a few things of exceptional value, with most everything else being of far less importance. The problem with being sleep-deprived is that it compromises our ability to tell the difference, and thus our precious ability to prioritize. Sleep will enhance your ability to explore, make connections, and do less but better throughout your waking hours.

Chapter 9 • SELECT: The Power of Extreme Criteria

A simple technique for becoming more selective in the choices we make is to put the decision to an extreme test: if we feel total and utter conviction to do something, then we say yes. Anything less gets a thumbs down.

If it isn't a clear yes, then it's a clear 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.

By definition, applying highly selective criteria is a trade-off; sometimes you will have to turn down a seemingly very good option and have faith that the perfect option will soon come along. Sometimes it will, and sometimes it won't, but the point is that the very act of applying selective criteria forces you to chose which perfect option to wait for, rather than letting other people, or the universe, choose for you—making decisions by design, not default.

PART 3 • ELIMINATE: How to Cut Out the Trivial Many

It's not enough to simply determine which activities and efforts don't make the best possible contribution; you still have to actively eliminate those that do not.

"What will I say no to?" is the question that will uncover your true priorities. It is the question that can deliver the rare and precious clarity necessary to achieve game-changing breakthroughs in your career, and in your life.

Chapter 10 • CLARIFY: One Decision That Makes a Thousand

When individuals are involved in too many disparate activities—even good activities—they can fail to achieve their essential mission. One reason for this

is the activities don't work in concert, so they don't add up to a meaningful whole.

How do we achieve clarity of purpose? One way is to decide on an essential intent. Once you make the big decision, then all subsequent decisions come into better focus. The 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?"

A powerful essential intent inspires people partially because it is concrete enough to answer the question, "How will we know when we have succeeded?"

Essential intent applies to so much more than your job description or your company's mission statement; a true essential intent is one that guides your



greater sense of purpose, and helps you chart your life's path.

Creating an essential intent is hard. It takes courage, insight, and foresight to see which activities and efforts will add up to the 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.

Chapter 11 • DARE: The power of a Graceful “No”

We need the courage to say no to the nonessential. Why is it so hard in the moment to dare to choose what is essential over what is nonessential?

One answer is that we are unclear about what is non-essential. On the other hand, when we have strong internal clarity it is almost as if we have a force field protecting us from the nonessentials coming at us from all directions. In virtually every instance, clarity about what is essential fuels us with the strength to say no to the nonessentials.

A second reason why it is hard to choose what is essential in the moment is as simple as an innate fear of social awkwardness. We feel guilty. We don't want to let someone down. But these emotions muddle our clarity. They distract us from the reality of the fact that either we can say no and regret it for a few minutes, or we can say yes and regret it for days, weeks, months, or even years.

The only way out of this trap is to learn to say no firmly, resolutely, and yet gracefully. Saying no is its own leadership capability. It is not just a peripheral skill.

Chapter 12 • UNCOMMIT: Win Big by Cutting Your Losses

A very common psychological phenomenon called “sunk-cost bias” is the tendency 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. The more we have invested in something, the harder it is to let go.

An Essentialist has the courage and confidence to admit his or her mistakes and uncommit, no matter the sunk costs.

We need to get over the fear of waste. It's natural not to want to let go of what we wasted on a bad choice, but when we don't, we doom ourselves to keep wasting more.

Typically, when accountants use zero-based budgeting, they use zero as the baseline. Instead of trying to budget your time on the basis of existing commitments, assume that all previous commitments are gone. Then begin from scratch, asking which use of time, energy, or resources you would add today. If it no longer fits, eliminate it altogether.

Since “uncommitting” can be harder than simply not committing in the first place—because no one likes to go back on their word—it might sound obvious, but pausing for five seconds before offering your services can greatly reduce the possibility of making a commitment you'll regret.

Chapter 13 • EDIT: The Invisible Art

By strictly eliminating the trivial, unimportant, or irrelevant, a good film editor makes it hard not to see what's important by cutting everything but the elements that absolutely need to be there. You need to take on the role of an editor in your life and leadership.

An editor is not merely someone who says no to things. A three-year-old can do that. In a way, an edi-



tor actually adds. A good editor uses deliberate subtraction to actually give life to the ideas, setting, plot, and characters. Likewise, in life, disciplined editing increases your ability to give energy to the things that really matter.

Editing aids execution by removing anything distracting or unnecessary or awkward. Of course, editing involves making trade-offs. Instead of trying to fit it all in—every character, every detail—an editor asks, “Will this character or detail make it better?”

The Latin root of the word decision—*cis* or *cid*—literally means “to cut” or “to kill.” Making the choice to eliminate something good can be painful, but every additional moment we have gained can be spent on something better.

Waiting too long to edit will force us to make major cuts not always of our choosing. Editing our time and activities as a natural cadence in our lives allows us to make more minor but deliberate adjustments along the way.

Chapter 14 • LIMIT: The Freedom of Setting Boundaries

The disappearance of boundaries is typical of our Nonessentialist era. For one thing, of course,

technology has completely blurred the lines between work and family. The boundary of work has edged insidiously into family territory.

It is hard to imagine executives in most companies who would be comfortable with employees bringing their children to work on Monday morning, yet they seem to have no problem expecting their employees to work on a Saturday or Sunday.

Maintaining personal boundaries can come at a high price. But not pushing back costs more: our ability to choose what is most essential in life. If you don’t set boundaries—there won’t be any.

Nonessentialists tend to think of boundaries as constraints or limits, things that get in the way of their hyperproductive life. But without limits, they eventually become spread so thin that getting anything done becomes virtually impossible.

Essentialists 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. Clear boundaries allow them to proactively eliminate the demands and encumbrances from others that distract them from the true essentials. Their problem is not your problem.

PART 3 • EXECUTE: How Can We Make Doing the Vital Few Things Almost Effortless?

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

Once you’ve figured out which activities and efforts to keep in your life, you have to have a system for executing them.

Chapter 15 • BUFFER: The Unfair Advantage

We live in an unpredictable world. Traffic. Delayed flights. Slippery sidewalks. We do not know if a supplier will be late, a colleague will drop the ball, or a client will change directions at the eleventh hour. The only thing we can expect (with any great





certainty) is the unexpected. Therefore, we can either wait for the moment and react to it or we can prepare. We can prepare by creating a buffer. A “buffer” can be defined literally as something that prevents two things from coming into contact and harming each other.

Beware the “planning fallacy”—people commonly underestimate how long a task will take, even when they have actually done the task before. Protect yourself by adding a 50 percent buffer to the amount of time you 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). And if all goes well, the extra found time feels like a bonus.

Accept the reality that we can never fully anticipate or prepare for every scenario or eventuality; the future is simple too unpredictable. So simply give yourself some wiggle room by building in buffers to reduce friction caused by the unexpected.

Chapter 16 • SUBTRACT: Bring Forth More by Removing Obstacles

What is the obstacle that is keeping you 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.

But this can’t be done in a haphazard way. Simply finding things that need fixing here and there might lead to marginal, short-term improvements at best: at worst, you’ll waste time and effort improving things that don’t really matter. But if you really want to improve the overall functioning of the system—whether that system is a manufacturing process, a procedure in your department, or some routine in your daily life—you need to look for the obstacles slowing down progress.

Instead of applying more and more pressure and piling on more and more solutions for a problem, make a one-time investment in removing obstacles.

First, be clear about your goal—your essential intent. Then identify all the obstacles standing between you and completing your goal.

Anything slowing down the execution of your goal should be questioned. For example, if your obstacle is your desire to make the report perfect, remove the idea “This has to be perfect or else” and replace it with “Done is better than perfect.”

Chapter 17 • PROGRESS: The Power of Small Wins

There are two opposing ways to approach an important goal or deadline. You can start early and small or start late and big. “Late and big” means doing it all at the last minute: pulling an all-nighter and “making it happen.” “Early and small” means starting at the earliest possible moment with the minimal possible time investment.

When we want to create major change we often think we need to lead with something huge or grandiose. Instead, we can adopt a method of “minimal viable progress,” and 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?”

Also, there is something powerful about visibly seeing progress toward a goal. Remember how exciting it was when you were five years old and your school held a fund-raiser, and you watched the level on the big thermometer go up as you made progress toward your goal?

When we start small and reward progress, we end up achieving more than when we set big, lofty, and often impossible goals. And as a bonus, the act of



positively reinforcing our successes allows us to reap more enjoyment and satisfaction out of the progress.

Chapter 18 • FLOW: The Genius of Routine

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. Instead of our consciously pursuing the essential, it will happen without our having to think about it.

To some, routine can sound like where creativity and innovation go to die—the ultimate exercise in boredom. But the right routines can actually enhance innovation and creativity by giving us the equivalent of an energy rebate. Instead of spending our limited supply of discipline and making the same decisions again and again, embedding our decisions into our routine allows us to channel that discipline toward some other essential activity.

Every habit is made up of a cue, a routine, and a reward. The cue triggers the routine based on a neurological connection with the reward. So to change a routine, we don't have to change the behavior. Rather, we need to find the cue and find a way to associate it with something that is essential. If passing the bakery triggers "donut," use that cue as a trigger to pick up a salad from the deli across the street.

Chapter 19 • FOCUS: What's Important Now?

Have you ever become trapped reliving past mistakes? Do you spend more time thinking about things you can't control rather than the things you can control in the areas where your efforts matter?

Do you ever find yourself mentally preparing for the next meeting, or the next assignment, or the next chapter in your life, rather than being fully present in the current one?

Every second spent worrying about a past or future moment distracts us from what is important in the here and now. In practical terms, we only ever have now. And only in the here and now can we actually execute on the things that really matter.

We can multitask. We can easily do two things at the same time: wash the dishes and listen to music, eat and talk, clear the clutter on our desk while thinking about where to go for lunch, text message while watching television, and so on. What we can't do is concentrate on two things at the same time. Multitasking is not the enemy; pretending we can "multifocus" is.

When we apply our full energy to the job at hand, we don't diffuse our efforts with distractions. Execution is easy if you work hard at it and hard if you work easy at it.

Chapter 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. One more thing you add to your already overstuffed life. The second is to think of it as something you are. It is a different way—a simpler way—of doing everything. It becomes a lifestyle.

The way of the Essentialist isn't just about success; it's about living a life of meaning and purpose. When we look back on our careers and our lives, would we rather see a long laundry list of "accomplishments" that don't really matter or a just a few major accomplishments that have real meaning and significance?



The life of an Essentialist is a life lived without regret. If you have correctly identified what really matters, if you invest your time and energy in it, then it is difficult to regret the choices you make.

Will you choose to live a life of purpose and meaning, or will you look back on your one single life with twinges of regret? 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.

APPENDIX: Leadership Essentials

Essentialism as a way of thinking and acting is as relevant to the way we lead companies and teams as it is to the way we lead our lives. You can apply these same skills and mindsets to your leadership:

- Be ridiculously selective in hiring people. One wrong hire is far costlier than being one person short.
- Establish a really clear (not pretty clear) essential intent. Clear intent leads to alignment—and the more a team is aligned, the greater their contribution will be.
- Go for extreme empowerment. Ensure that everyone on the team is really clear about what they are expected to contribute and what everybody else is contributing.
- Communicate the right things to the right people at the right time. Show restraint in communication to keep the team focused; when you do speak, be crystal clear.
- Check in often to ensure meaningful progress. When a leader is clear about the one thing that is really required, followup is easy and frictionless. Reward small wins and help people remove obstacles.

Simply leading according to the principle of “less but better” will enable your team to amplify their level of collective contribution and achieve something truly remarkable.

The Pastor’s Perspective

I loved *Essentialism*! I think the concepts outlined in this book could be life-changing for many people I know. As I read it, I realized I have been on a journey in that direction for a while, but had never identified it so clearly.

I think identifying that thing, or those few things, that are truly essential is one of the most powerful steps any person can take to improve their life. There is a peace that comes with that kind of focus that doesn’t really come any other way. And it provides an antidote for the crazy-busy lifestyle that many of us have bought into.

It’s actually hard to limit myself to only one or two things—this is a book worth reading and re-reading. But I will choose to do that.

The first thing I’ll mention is this insight:

Nonessentialists tend to think of boundaries as constraints or limits, things that get in the way of their hyperproductive life. But without limits, they eventually become spread so thin that getting anything done becomes virtually impossible.

I’ve talked to so many people who have this idea. They view being productive as being busy, so they never say “no” to anything. They don’t set limits, and do get spread ridiculously thin. They end up doing everything at the last minute, and have little or no time to actually think about things, and then lose the depth and creativity they could have if they took the time to think. But they don’t see it, and often take pride in their busy-ness.





The key here, I think, is shifting our mindset away from focusing on how much we get done, to how much that is really important and meaningful gets done. It's true—most of the things that take up our time are not really important. Learning to identify what really is, and then focusing on that, is critical if we want a life well-lived.

The other thing I made note of was actually a pretty simple insight, related to multitasking:

We can multitask. We can easily do two things at the same time: wash the dishes and listen to music, eat and talk, clear the clutter on our desk while thinking about where to go for lunch, text message while watching television, and so on. What we can't do is concentrate on two things at the same time. Multitasking is not the enemy; pretending we can "multifocus" is.

I've seen people argue about multitasking for years. Some say they can do it, others say it's not possible. But McKeown nails it when he makes the distinction between activity and focus. We can do simple, mundane things at the same time, but we can't concentrate on two things at once.

I find there are lots of things I need to concentrate on. Identifying those things, and then removing distractions and not trying to multitask while working on them makes me more productive, both in terms of the quantity of work I can do and the quality I put out. It's a simple but powerful distinction.

