

Living Textbook | **TAMING THE CHAOS**

What I've learned from professional organizers

Last of three parts

For nearly a year, I've been studying professional organizers and the ways they help people get and stay organized.



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As someone who studies American culture, I love exploring how the rise of organizing connects to other changes in how we live

and work – our tendency to accumulate, how overwhelmed we feel by competing demands on our time and attention, and our increased comfort hiring professionals to help manage our homes and lives.

But I'm not only an academic. As a person with my own home and office to organize, I found the research fascinating on a different level as well. Many days, after returning home from an organizing seminar or a day spent assisting an organizer on the job, I immediately set about reorganizing some area of my home.

First it was the coffee mugs, a third of which went straight to Goodwill. Next was the utensil drawer, where I created gads of space by removing rarely used items and nestling spatulas together on their sides, rather than lying flat, a trick I learned from a before-and-after photo one organizer showed me on her iPad. Another day it was the closet, where I purged most things I hadn't worn in the previous year and tucked cold-weather items away in a bin on a top shelf.

Sometimes the changes felt more significant. In a talk on de-cluttering, one organizer said her weakness was unread magazines and newspapers, stacks of which tended to accumulate around her home. Sometimes, she explained, she just had to give herself permission not to read all those magazines, to let them go and not feel guilty about it. She saved the ones she really wanted and recycled or donated the rest.

I'd heard this advice before, but this time it hit home. I had two magazine racks at home full of torn-out academic articles I'd been meaning to read or, more accurately, felt I should read – some for more than two years (not counting dozens of PDFs in the Articles-to-Read file on my computer). I also had an entire bookcase full of books to read – four shelves, each packed end to end. I went home and recycled a stack of articles at least 10 inches



Books and magazines can be classified as must-reads or probably-should-reads. SHUTTERSTOCK

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high, donated two bags of books to a student book sale and moved another bagful to work, where my work-related books belong. I gave myself permission to not read them, at least not now, and it felt wonderful. I felt lighter, more relaxed, and less burdened by the stacks and shelves of "shoulds" and "musts." The stacks have re-grown some, but now I manage them more proactively, applying a harsher standard to what I keep. If months have passed I ask myself whether this is a must-read or a probably-should-read, in which case I let it go.

I relate this story not because everyone is plagued by unread articles, but because it was one of the most important lessons I learned from organizers and I think it applies to all of us in one way or another.

Our problem areas might differ, but we all have them. And so I have gathered here some of the most useful tips I learned from organizers, ones I heard again and again and saw applied in many different and effective ways. I hope readers will find them

as helpful as I have.

JUST LET IT GO

Give yourself permission to get rid of items you do not use and that do not make you happy, especially those that make you feel guilty or sad. It's okay to donate grandma's china if you never use it; someone else will, and your grandmother would be happy to know it found a good home.

GROUP LIKE WITH LIKE

Occasionally I arrived at an organizing job and was immediately overwhelmed by the sheer mass of belongings we needed to sort through. In those moments, I truly appreciated the skill professional organizers bring to the job. While I was daunted by the forest, they focused on the trees. From tasks tiny to gargantuan, most organizers apply the same rule – just start putting things together with other similar items until you've created distinct piles of related belongings.

A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING

Once items have been sorted, the next step is figuring out where they belong, which is easier once you've grouped them and know exactly how many bottles of shampoo you're dealing with or how many coats you need to fit back into that closet. Clutter, it is often said, is just stuff that doesn't have a home.

Once you install a hook for your keys, that's where they live when they're not with you. Once you know all unpaid bills go into one folder, you're less likely to lose a bill and end up paying late fees. And speaking of mail ...

TOUCH IT ONCE

Some organizers are emphatic about shredding all personal documents (even magazine covers with your mailing address) while others shred only sensitive financial or legal papers.

However, nearly every organizer encourages sorting the mail over the garbage or recycling bin. Most of it is junk, they say, and putting the stack elsewhere to deal with later often results in lost mail and piles so intimidating it's difficult to muster the will to tackle them. This falls under the broader category of dealing with items the first time you encounter them, especially if doing so will take less than five minutes.

When a child brings home a permission slip, sign it right then, put it back in the backpack, and be done with it. When an email arrives, read it once and either respond, file it or delete it, saving yourself the time it takes to reread it later and the pesky knowledge of it sitting there waiting for you.

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE STUFF

As I mentioned in a previous article, disorganization is rarely about the items themselves – it's about the emotions we attach to specific belongings or behaviors. My overwhelming piles of articles and books were really about trying to prove my professional worth; if I read everything I'd be a better teacher, a better scholar, a better person. But of course that's an unreasonable goal, not to mention an unhealthy one. I needed a better attitude, not a bigger bookshelf.

If you're dealing with a cluttered home, unproductive workspace or inefficient time management system, the first step is to consider how you got to this place and why.

The second step might be to hire an organizer, especially if your answer to step one was, "I have no idea," or it might just be to reassess your goals and how to best reach them. Either way, self-awareness is an important piece of the organizing process, and not a bad thing in its own right, either.

TITAN VOICES

Engines of opportunity

As I start my first full academic year as Cal State Fullerton's provost and vice president for academic affairs, I can't help but reflect on how educators shape the life trajectories of their students. Oftentimes they do this not through their instruction, but through their seemingly random acts of kindness and humanity.

I remember being a couple of weeks into the first grade in a school in Florida.

My parents, my brother and I had moved to Florida from Puerto Rico so that my dad could take a low-level position in a local telephone company.

I did not understand the English language. Actually, I don't think I had ever heard anyone speak the language before I got there.

So when at school, I did the only sensible thing I could do. I kept very quiet and tried to be invisible.

This strategy worked well at the beginning. But soon it became evident that there was something wrong with the new brown kid.

Kids and teachers would try to get me to participate in everyday school activities, but to no avail. And intrigue quickly turned to ridicule.

One day, I was halfway to school when I decided to turn my bike around, head back home and never, never, ever – "nunca, nunca, nunca" – go back to school again.

After a couple of hours of intense lobbying, my mother convinced me to go back. She suggested that I simply tell the teacher that "I was sick in the morning." I think she asked me to do that because she, too, struggled with the language and thought this course of action was easier than trying to write a note to my teacher to explain my tardiness.

As I pedaled back to school, I kept repeating my mom's words in my head: "I was sick in the morning," "I was sick in the morning," "I was sick in the morning."

I got to school, parked my bike, filled myself with courage, walked into the classroom and blurted out what I later learned was something like, "I was a chick in the morning."

The room burst out in laughter and mocking chicken sounds. I felt very small and wished I could be smaller. I was beginning to hate myself for listening to my mother, but then my very large teacher walked over to me, hugged me tight and said, "Yo ayudo

tu." With her broken Spanish, she quieted the laughter and my self-doubt.

With her hug and her promise to help me, she broke down the barriers standing in the way of my progress toward a lifelong journey in education.

Today, I am privileged to work in an institution that recognizes learning as preeminent; engages its students, faculty and staff in the hard work of expanding knowledge and enriching lives;

and serves its community well – not only as a hub for intellectual, cultural and economic development, but more important, in this day and age, as an engine of opportunity for an ever-growing and increasingly diverse population.

Through its curricular and cocurricular offerings, our university awards nearly 9,000 degrees every year and ranks first in the state of California and sixth in the nation among top universities awarding bachelor's degrees to Hispanics. Our commitment to access is evident from the fact that more than half of our graduates are first among their families to earn a college degree. Indeed, The Washington Monthly recently ranked Cal State Fullerton first in California and fourth in the nation in terms of educational value and 22nd in the nation in terms of the university's contribution to the public good.

For our nation to remain internationally competitive and true to its ideals of opportunity and social mobility, higher education institutions must expand access, improve student learning, increase degree completion rates and keep costs affordable. Cal State Fullerton has the credentials and is ready and willing to lead the way. Our recently unveiled strategic plan states it best: Cal State Fullerton aims to become a model public comprehensive university, nationally recognized for exceptional programs that prepare our diverse student body for academic and professional success.

I am proud to call myself a Titan and look forward to the hard but impactful work ahead.

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