

National Bestseller

Completely Revised and Updated

Getting Things Done

Second Edition

When You Are Not In Charge

Geoffrey M. Bellman

an excerpt from

Getting Things Done
When You are Not In Charge

by Geoffrey M. Bellman
Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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Preface

You are not in charge. You may not be clear who *is* in charge, but you know that you are not. In spite of this, you want to do your work well, you want to contribute to the organization, and you want to succeed personally. These wants often cause conflict, as you are challenged to support others' goals while working toward your own. You feel irritated by the difficulty of trying to get something done and not having the power to do it. You feel constrained by the formal and informal boundaries of the organization. You try to do your best, but keep running up against the rules of play in the organization you are trying to help. You may work in the profit or not-for-profit sector. You may give your time or work for money. You may be a manager, a director, a salaried or an hourly worker. It does not matter. You share with many others the desire to do good work, the need for recognition, and the frustration of having your efforts blocked by the very organization you are trying to serve.

You are not as powerless as you sometimes feel: that is the main premise of this book. This book explores the many ways you can get things done, support the work of others, and find greater life fulfillment through your work. There are ways of dealing with the issues inherent in working for an organization. I know the issues well after thirty-five years in and around organizations. I have lived with the dilemmas of working from the middle of large corporations, government agencies, school systems, hospitals, foundations, and not-for-profit organizations. I have had amazing success and sobering failure, and I have learned. This book builds on my learning, and on the learning of others with whom I have worked, and it can be a guide to your learning as well. It is my answer to the question "How can you feel good about your work and make a difference when you have little formal power?"

Organizations loom large in our lives; you know the struggles that come with working in them. You know what it is like to have clear, constructive intentions and to be confounded by the way this place works. You know how hard it is to hold onto hope while faced with daily frustrations. You know the stress, the burnout, the fatigue, and you have felt yourself alternately rising to the challenge or sinking into skepticism. You see those frequent “learning opportunities” that come with trying to get something done, and sometimes feel that you have learned enough—it is somebody else’s turn. You know the energy it takes to step back into the fray, and are tempted just to save your energy and protect yourself. This book helps your pursuit of the hope, the challenge, the opportunity, and the learning from right where you are now, in your formally less-powerful position.

“I am not in charge.” Can you hear yourself saying these words? Say them aloud or in your mind: What do you sound like? What was your tone of voice? How did you feel? When did you last say something like this to someone about your work? As I have listened to myself and others say these words, I sort the statements and their underlying feelings into two stacks: One stack sounds more active, hopeful, or even matter-of-fact; the other sounds more passive, powerless, or even victimized. Over my many work years, I have contributed to both stacks . . . and guess which stack I feel better about.

If you are not in charge, who is? That is a good question. You will see, as you read further, that I doubt any one person is truly in charge. We create a sense of purpose and responsibility together, and we do it in ways that make us all interdependent—whether we choose to see it that way or not. Everyone is accountable to others, and that accountability circles back within the boundaries of an organization, helping to define what it is and what it does. We point to the CEO’s or ED’s or Chairs as if they are in charge, but that is more our wish for simplicity and security than it is an expression of reality. We maintain the “in-chargeness” that selected people experience for organizational convenience; we know just how much and how little they are really in charge of. We agree to putting some people “in charge,” knowing that they have to earn the support of the people around them if they are to get anything done.

If anyone is in charge around here, it is the top executive, right? Well, no. In my close work with the leaders of many organizations, I have noticed the direct relationship between their effectiveness and not being in charge. Said differently, those executives who constantly be-

have as if they are in charge are not nearly as effective as those who act as if they are not.

What This New Edition Is About

Fifteen years ago, I wrote what I thought was my first and last book on getting things done from the middle of large organizations. That book was titled *The Quest for Staff Leadership*; it was written for the managers of service and support functions in corporate America. The book was well received, went through five printings, and even received a national award. Six years later I revised the book significantly, wrote it to a wider audience—everyone in support positions in the corporate world. And here I am rewriting it yet again, and reaching out beyond the corporate world to everyone in the middle of organizations of any kind. This rewriting, moving from book two to book three, is just as significant as the move from book one to book two. There are two main reasons: what has been happening in the organization world and what I have learned along the way.

In the fifteen years since book one, the organization world has been chaotic. Reading over my earlier versions reminded me of how much the organizational world has changed in less than a generation. Information technology and systems, cyberspace, mergers, acquisitions and divestitures, virtual teams, global marketplace, generation X, politics, prosperity, recession, dot.coms, shifting demography, aging population, health care, education, and you could add to the list. Change is in the air. It is disrupting everything and everyone who tries to remain static, and it looks as if this unpredictable untidiness will continue indefinitely. All of this external change profoundly affects the ways we get things done, and makes working successfully from the middle even more important than ever before.

I have added fifteen years to my work experience, and I have added years of not-for-profit experience to my years with for-profits. I've had more time to watch for patterns. I've learned more about what allows people to thrive in the middle of organizations, and I am more encouraged than ever about the opportunities present in today's emerging organizations for the able, invested individual. This new book might better be called an adaptation than a new edition. Not a paragraph has gone untouched; much of it is brand new. The entire book has been refocused, rewritten, and reordered.

Why I Wrote This Book

Work is central, whether you are telecommuting from home, or traveling with an electronic tether back to the office, or showing up daily to pursue the same work in the same cubicle, or giving hours a week to your community. Work is a primary way to develop yourself while contributing to the world. You have the opportunity to pursue your life's meaning through working, and this book was written to help you in that pursuit. There ought to be more to life in an organization than just “earning a living” or “doing your duty.” Work offers the real possibility of accomplishing something wonderful for yourself, for the people you work with, for the organization you serve, and even for the community and world beyond. Through this book I will help you to consider what you want to accomplish and to do something about it.

Your effectiveness in your various tasks and your power with the others with whom you work, comes from your sense of work's importance in your life. Your enthusiasm for your work and your delight with your contribution are directly connected to your sense that this work has meaning in your life. This book is infused with the essential importance of work to our lives; we have the opportunity (free or forced) to work and discover ourselves in the process. Our daily practical choices can lead us toward the lives we want. The higher authority of our own life purpose can inform each decision we make in a way that gives us more success and happiness. At least, that is what I am reaching for through writing this book; I hope to be a guide for you in your work life. The practical choices and actions involved in doing this will become clear in later chapters.

Who Is This Book For?

If you regularly work with an organization—for money or for free—and you want to succeed for the sake of the organization and of yourself, then this book is for you. All you need to bring is the willingness to improve yourself and the organization. You do not need a high salary or position; you do not need a diploma or a desk. But you do need to bring yourself and the belief that your work can be a source of happiness. Many of our most successful workers *love* working. It's not unusual to find two people working side by side, where she loves her work and he hates it—and both have the same job. What makes the difference? It is clearly not the nature of the work itself; it has more to do with how people approach it. And how they approach others. These two people with

exactly the same roles have made regular choices about how they will deal with others, and each choice has its own consequences. These two people choose how they see their roles, and that choice too has consequences. All of this is played out within an organization culture full of expectations and assumptions about the people working there, yielding even more consequences. This book is for people who relish—or would like to relish—going to work each day because their work holds promise. Rather than wasting their breath complaining about their lack of formal power, they build their personal power and get things done.

How to Read This Book

I have written this book for the busy person who seldom reads a book from cover to cover. After the introduction and first chapter, go where your current issues and interests take you. I did not write the book in the order you find it, and you do not have to read it sequentially. Open it to a random chapter and start reading. You will find that most chapters, after first guiding your thinking to a few key points, offer examples, actions, and exercises that help you think more deeply about your work—and maybe even do something about it.

Acknowledgments

Life does not allow us to succeed on our own; others are essential in defining who we are. I am especially indebted to the many organizations with whom I have worked as an employee or a consultant, for pay or for free, over the last thirty-five years. They taught me how to work with them. Whatever you find useful here, I learned there. I appreciate the experienced eyes and professional minds who critiqued the first edition of this book and suggested what I might do this time: Thank you Allan Paulson, Kathleen Webb Tunney, Frank Basler, Cathie Leavitt, and Jeff Pym. Sheila Kelly did the editing; she is a joy to work with—and even more fun to be married to. Steve Piersanti and his company, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, treat me in ways that most authors only dream of. It is a privilege to work with him again, on this our fifth book together.

*Geoff Bellman
Seattle
March 2001*

You Are Not In Charge

We succeed by helping others succeed; our accomplishment is dependent on theirs. In our more expansive moments, we might say that we make them successful. In their more generous moments, they might say that they couldn't do it without us. We are often in-between, wondering how best to contribute and how much difference we make. Some of us get trapped "on hold," waiting for the authority, waiting for others to tell us what to do. That does not work.

Our only chance for contributing is to quit waiting and wondering and *do something*. We serve ourselves and others best when we do not wait. Initiate, with the organization and all involved people in mind. No, we are not in charge but we can act. No, we are not formally designated leaders, but we can lead. This book will help you think of yourself as a leader, as someone who helps an organization, its people, and resources move in new directions. Yes, right from where you are, not waiting until you've moved into a more powerful position. Whether you are an individual contributor, a middle manager, a school principal, or a precinct chair, there is much you can do from your position right there in the middle of things. Whether you are an entering programmer, a journeyman mechanic, a PTA parent, or a social worker, you can

choose to lead others. And, the first step in leading others at work is leading your own life.

The Illusion: Someone Is in Charge

Many of us grew up with the expectation that someone will watch over us, take care of us, be “in charge,” “know best,” and that this will turn out okay. Our families, schools, communities, and organizations taught us to believe this, but their teachings began to fray pretty early, usually before we became adults. Our contradictory experience confused us; we saw people “in charge” producing very mixed results. The people in position to “do what’s best” disappointed us. Programs they created, decisions they made, did not turn out okay—at least not for us and what we wanted out of our lives. We discovered that they would *not* watch over us. An extremely hard part of this learning is not our disappointment in them but our struggles with our own responsibility: If they are not in charge, who is? If I cannot count on them, who can I count on? What is my responsibility in helping my family, my community, my employer, or this world? What can I, what *will* I, do with my life? These are the big questions lurking behind the work questions we struggle with daily.

You may be thinking, “But someday I *will* be in charge of that committee (or agency or division or team) and I *will* change things!” Well, think again. That’s akin to getting married with the plan to start changing your spouse immediately after the ceremony. My research says that does not work very well. I have often heard executives lament about their difficulties in getting things done. When the president of a telecommunications company (with 23,000 employees across five states and nine hierarchical levels) first saw this book, he said “Finally, a book written for me!” His employees may not see him as not in charge, but he frequently feels that way. He knows the limitations of authority. It is too easy for us to attribute power to a position that we have yet to hold, or that others hold, and to diminish the power we currently have. This book works with the powers we now hold.

The Life Game

For a few minutes, imagine your life as a game with rules and goals, roles and scores. Life is much more complicated than a game, but tem-

porarily imagine playing Life as you might play bridge, or *Myst*TM, or soccer. Within this game called Life, you decide its purposes and rules. You decide the roles you will play; you decide what earns points; you keep score. Actions that move you toward your life goals earn points. Actions that move you away from your life goals lose points. You create the game of Life as you play it; you can change the rules. Unpredictable, uncontrollable, unreasonable outside forces influence Life. You are in the middle of Life now; you are playing.

That is how life works when seen through the simpler game metaphor. It is the largest of the many games we play: games like School, Parent, Politics, Citizen, Child, and Work. In this book, most of our attention will be directed at the game of Work as a subset of the game of Life—and the challenge of playing the two games while keeping Work subordinate to Life. Often, other people decide the explicit rules and goals for Work before you arrive. And you have implicitly decided the rules and goals of Life before you arrive to “play” Work. The challenge is engaging deeply with both games, and keeping Work within the larger context of Life. Five guides shape this book:

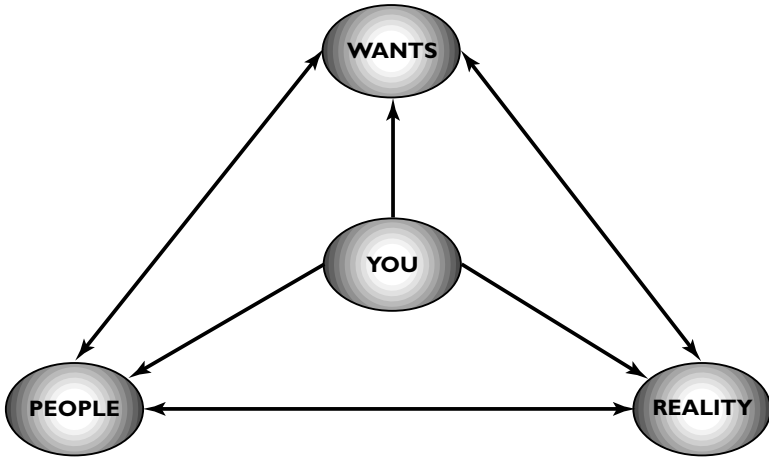
1. *Create your life game.* The secret of getting things done when you are not in charge is to establish a life larger than work, in which you are more in charge than at work. Without this larger, more important life game, you will end up playing by the rules of the work game, or reacting against them with no clear sense of purpose.
2. *Learn the work game.* There is a work game where you work. It has its own rules and roles, goals and penalties—whether you are aware of it or not. There are ways for people to succeed. Certain behaviors are respected; others are disparaged. Learn this. It is not a matter of liking but of understanding how this work game works.
3. *Know your position in the work game.* This allows you to know where you are starting from. Again, it does not mean that you like it, but that you understand what comes with the position you have. The best starting point for changing your position, or the work game, is to know what you are starting with. Of course, if you hate your position, you should not be playing here. Which leads to . . .
4. *Recognize there are other work games.* There are other places in this world of work where you could be offering your talents. All

of those other places have work games of their own. Choose the work game you play, always honoring your larger life game. If your life game is not being served by this work game, then go play somewhere else. Your ultimate power in the work game comes from *choosing* to play here, and knowing you make that choice daily.

- 5.** *Play well and hard at both Work and Life.* Concentrate. Keep reminding yourself of what is important. Know your skills and your aspirations.

The most useful ideas in this book link back to this Life and Work game metaphor. Life direction is your source of power; options open when you see your work as a vital part of your life. Creating your life game is difficult; you are the game designer, rulemaker, player, coach, referee, scorekeeper, cheerleader, and spectator. Little wonder that we often opt to play others' games, winning and losing under rules they have made. Others can help us figure out Life, but no one else can play Life for us. A pattern of playing others' games usually calls us back to our own life game: What do we want to do with this life? And how might our work support that?

A Model for Getting Things Done



Often, what we need is a simple way to dig through the messiness of task forces, councils, or committees to which we belong. That's what this model is about. It gives us a way of sorting all the information that inundates us; it helps us decide what is important, and to sort it from what is not. Our hope of influencing our organizations increases when we have a way of understanding them. The Getting Things Done (GTD) model has been useful to many people over the years. You will see this GTD model repeatedly; it is the hook upon which the content of this book hangs. The model's usefulness is directly related to its simplicity. You can remember it in the middle of a meeting; you can use it to ask questions or to seek or sort the information you need. Or, you can use it to sort out issues within your own life. Or, an entire organization can pause to consider this model.

Consider the four elements of the GTD model:

- **WANTS:** This is the way you would like the world to be, the possible, the desirable, the potential world—and it is usually different from **REALITY**. The difference between **WANTS** and **REALITY** creates a tension.

- **REALITY:** This is how things are right now, the day-to-day world in which you and others live, with all its comforts and discomforts, joys and sorrows, satisfactions and dissatisfactions.
- **PEOPLE:** These are the individuals and groups that care about the world as it is (REALITY) and/or as it could be (WANT). They are a potential source of talent, energy, money, expertise, and other resources. They may be for or against what you want to do, and they are vital to it.
- **YOU:** You are in the middle of all of this with potential connections to the PEOPLE, WANTS, and REALITY. You are not in charge but you definitely want to get something done. Connecting the dots will create movement and help PEOPLE change REALITY to what they WANT.

This model puts *you* in the pivotal role. You are potentially powerful; you can connect the dots, making a solid change triangle. You are key to the change. But for this to happen, you have to step out of the PEOPLE corner and define yourself as someone who is willing to take action. Like the person in this example: A worker in a manufacturing plant noticed that disagreements between her shift and the next shift were increasing, reaching the point where they were blaming each other for everything and hardly talking. She decided to do something about it. She gathered a few key PEOPLE over coffee to begin to discuss the REALITY of what was going on and what they WANTED. They agreed that they all wanted work to be a more positive experience. They identified and agreed to work on two problems. None of this would have happened if that one worker had not separated herself from all of the PEOPLE and taken individual action. She brought the issue; she gathered the right people; they identified what they wanted and what they had; they took constructive action.

This example shows the GTD model in action, and it shows how the investment of one person can make a difference. That's what the model is about, making a positive difference in your work world, stepping out to help people move the present reality toward what you all want. This could be called a "change" model or a "leadership" model. Whether or not you think in terms of being a change agent or a leader, I do, and I will frequently talk in those terms in the coming chapters. The movement from REALITY toward WANTS is change, and YOU at the center of this model are a leader when you start hooking the three corners together.

Explore the four elements of the GTD model through these questions:

WANTS

Why is that important?

What do key people in this organization want?

What do their wants have in common?

How do their wants differ?

How committed are they to acting on their wants?

REALITY

What is really happening?

How do key people describe what exists right now?

What do their descriptions have in common?

How do their descriptions differ?

How responsible do they feel for the current state of affairs?

PEOPLE

Who makes a difference?

Who could be affected by the changes anticipated?

Who are the key people?

What are their special talents, resources, or powers?

How willing are they to work with each other?

YOU

How might you help?

What special talents, resources, or powers do you have?

Why do you want to change things?

How does your description of wants fit with others?

How does your description of reality fit with others?

How well do you work with the people involved?

The GTD model, along with the above questions, can help us to think before acting. There are more questions that could be asked; these are merely a sample. Ask these questions of the people you work with and

your questions will move them. Things will be different just because you asked. Your questions stir the four key elements. Through questions and answers, the four elements are connected and the change dynamic begins.

This book revolves around the GTD model, with chapters highlighting one of the four key elements or the dynamics among them. The table of contents can guide you to particular elements or dynamics that interest you.

AN EXERCISE

Drawing Your Life

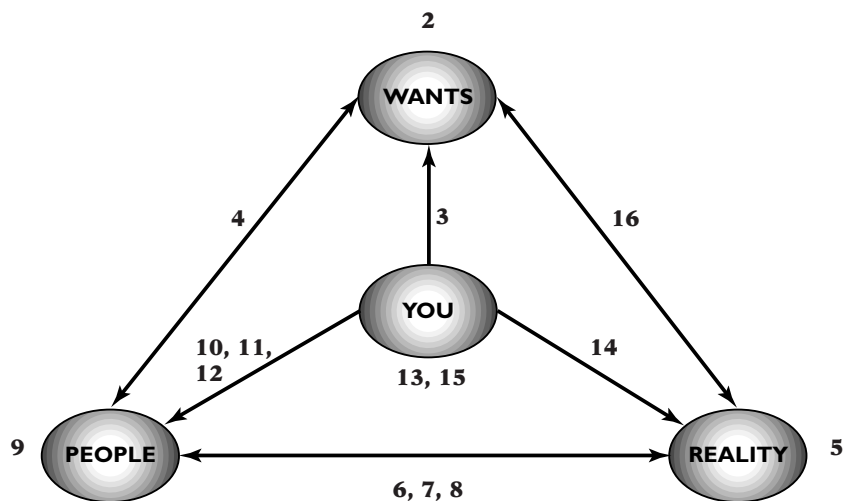
Deepen your familiarity with the GTD model by spending 15 minutes on these six steps.

1. Draw the four key elements of GTD model on a large sheet of paper. Make the circles large enough (3–4 inches across) that you can write or draw in them. Put the labels (WANTS, REALITY, PEOPLE, and YOU) above their circles.
2. In the REALITY, use words and symbols to represent your life as it is right now. That's right, your life. Indicate those parts of it that really stand out for you at the moment. Take just 2–3 minutes to do this.
3. In the WANTS circle, represent your life as you want it to be. With words or symbols note what you hope to have as a part of your future. It may include some of what you already have; it may include more. Take 2–3 minutes to do this.
4. In the PEOPLE circle, name people particularly important to you in your life—as it really is and/or as you want it to be. Note those people's names or roles or positions. Take a minute to do that.
5. In the YOU circle, note your reactions to the idea of engaging those PEOPLE in helping you move from the REALITY you've got toward what you WANT from your life. Spend 3–5 minutes thinking about yourself and making a few notes.
6. An option: Using this sheet as a visual aid, tell your friend, spouse, child, or parent about your life as you see it right now.

This exercise can form a deeper awareness of the GTD model and the dynamics within it. You can see, and perhaps feel, the differences between *reality* and *wants*; you imagine how these people affect the life you lead; you think about what you might do to get people's help. Most of the time in this book, we will be applying portions of the model to situations that are a subset of your life—particularly the work you are doing with others.

What to Read Next

The Getting Things Done model is the framework for the book. The chapters cover the model in this way:



Each chapter focuses on a particular corner or connection of the model and has a central theme represented in the title of the chapter. The themes are sometimes questions (What is really important?) and sometimes direction (Face the politics). These are key questions and actions for you, the reader, to consider as you think about getting things done at work. Let's elaborate a bit more on the chapters surrounding the four main elements or corners of the model.

WANTS: “Why Is That Important?” To learn more about the importance of people’s WANTS as related to leading and changing in your organization, begin with Chapter 2: Why Is That Important?; Chapter 3: Pursuing Your Aspirations; and Chapter 4: Discovering Dreams. WANTS draw us toward something better; WANTS cause movement. Without WANTS, nothing happens. Connect with their WANTS.

REALITY: “What Is Really Happening?” For more about assessing and understanding what is *really* going on right now, turn to Chapter 5: What Is Really Happening?; and Chapter 6: Build Common Understanding. We often miss out on the change we want because we are starting from different understandings of the current REALITY—what we have. If you want to succeed in getting things done with others, you’d better pay attention to their starting point.

PEOPLE: “Who Makes a Difference?”

If you want to learn about identifying and working with those people particularly important to the issues now facing you and the organization, try Chapter 9: Who Makes A Difference?; and Chapter 10: Enlist Able Partners. All the change we undertake comes through working with key people; these chapters focus on building constructive relationships with them.

YOU: “How Might You Help?”

If you want to learn more about yourself as a unique resource, begin with Chapter 13: How Might You Help?; Chapter 14: Find the Courage to Risk; and Chapter 15: Making Your Work Rewarding. All change starts here, whether we are aware of it or not. Our challenge is to become more aware and do our own work before we set out to do other people’s work.

The first chapter of the book, and the last two, offer ideas and actions important to the entire GTD model. You have already read Chapter 1: A Model For Getting Things Done. Chapter 16: Create Change, lays out some of the ground rules for making change work, whether in your whole organization, your work group, or your own life. Chapter 17: Actions That Get Things Done, offers twenty ways I have used many times to stimulate some movement in an organization.

this material has been excerpted from

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by Geoffrey M. Bellman

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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