

Six common mistakes

How you can get organized for good

By Vicki Norris

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Are you one of those people who panics when guests are scheduled to come to your house? Do you begin the frantic “dash and stash,” running around your house trying to conceal your piles of clutter? Do you slide your arm across surfaces, piled high with paper and clutter, and shove the contents into a bag or box, then stash it in the closet? If so, you are like a lot of my clients, who inadvertently have taken enticing shortcuts to true organizing.

As you begin getting organized, you will likely discover bags, boxes, junk drawers and even entire rooms that have been a receptacle for your organizing efforts. You might begin to wonder how this pile-up has happened to you. In the trenches of disorganized homes and offices across America, I've discovered six common shortcuts to true organizing. In reviewing them, I hope you can discover where you may have taken a wrong turn that has derailed your organizing progress:

- **The Product Panacea** – In an effort to address our disorder, we often rush off to the store and buy a hunk of plastic (usually with multiple drawers) and throw it at our mess. Product alone is not the answer. I've seen people with hundreds of bins and baskets who are still disorganized. I recommend partnering a good organizing process with the appropriate product introduced at the right time in the project. If you preemptively buy product without determining exactly what you want to contain and how it will improve functionality, you will likely have wasted your money.
- **The Rearranging Remedy** – A lot of us take the approach of entering a room and “getting it organized” but at the end of the day, all we've done is rearrange its contents. We grouped, stacked and shuffled, but that's as far as we could take it. We didn't know what to do with the contents of the room so we simply rearranged it back into the same space. Instead, take the time to ask questions and assign a purpose of each space and organize around those purposes.
- **The Cleaning Cure-All** – While it is wonderful to have a clean home, it's not the same thing as an organized home. Cleaning simply de-grimes your living space, while organizing requires planning and space allocation to activities and items. Cleaning can actually create clutter, since many of us hide things as we clean in order to get to the surfaces. The good news is: when you've taken the time to organize your home, it is also easier to clean, because nomadic items can be returned to their appropriate location, and surfaces aren't clogged with clutter.
- **The Stashing Solution** – We stash even when we're not cleaning. If we are trying to “pick up,” we look to the nearest empty spot to stash it. We hijack open spaces on shelves, counters and drawers, and in closets, stacking them full of odds and ends. In our attempt to get things off the floors and surfaces, we stuff our way to a disorganized environment where nothing has a home. To stop stashing, you'll want to observe the assigned purpose of each area of the home (ie: the game closet) and use my “Only Policy” to limit the items landing in that closet to “games only.”

■ The Tidying Trick – It is likely that at some point, we have all tidied up our space instead of organizing it, aiming for a neat appearance. This organizing mistake is especially easy to make because it feels so productive! With good intentions, many of us have stayed late at work or come into the office on a weekend to deal with our messy workspace. We tossed and recycled and purged and we were proud of our progress. Sadly, within a couple of weeks we found ourselves sitting in a messy space once again, shaking our heads in disbelief. Tidying up never lasts very long. If you have not implemented systems for capturing and processing incoming paper and information you will be stuck in an endless cycle of tidying.

■ The Cookie Cutter – We so badly want to believe that there is a magic potion for our organizing challenges that we will try almost any solution. The last serious organizing mistake we make is when we take a universal tip or method and try to apply it to our own mess. This is the “cookie cutter” approach to organizing. I have come to believe that there is no one tip or trick that will work for every person. Each person needs and deserves organizing solutions designed with him or her in mind.

Just like frantic dieters trying to cut pounds, the disorganized masses are looking for a quick and easy shortcut to their messy homes and offices. We all want to believe that “in three simple steps” or in “five minutes a day” we can get organized. Yet, deep down I think we all know – as we survey the landscape of our rooms layered with clutter – that there is no way (short of arson) we can untangle our mess in three steps or five minutes.

We come to a moment of truth where we finally understand that shortcutting only short-circuits our organizing efforts. Our compulsion to cut corners isn’t going to help us truly restore order. We’re going to have to retire our haphazard attempts to get organized and look for a better way.

I’ve shared a solution to each of the shortcuts described above. In order to achieve lasting change, you must “dig out” of the backlog that you’ve created over the years and “dig in” to set up new systems to help you manage in the future. Here’s to “restoring order” to your space and reclaiming your life in 2008!

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