

# *The* EFFECTIVE EXECUTIVE'S ASSISTANT

*How to Make Use of Your  
Most Important Management Resource*



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# The Effective Executive's Assistant

How to Make Use of Your Most Important  
Management Resource

James Skinner, Roice Krueger, and Mark Victor Hansen

No truly successful executive ever got there alone.  
“The Effective Executive’s Assistant” shows you  
how the most successful people use their assistants  
as leverage to get to the top and stay there.

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## The Effective Executive's Assistant

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**NOTE:** Ideas That Can Change Your Life™ is a collaboration of three of the world's most amazing authors, speakers, and thinkers. The first person "I" may refer to any of the authors.

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### You Must Have an Assistant

Hiring exactly the right person to be your assistant should double, triple, or quadruple your income in a snap. So it's a very important decision, and it's too bad more people don't treat it as such.

Executive assistants make life at a higher level possible for their employers. How many truly successful, mega-wealthy executives do you know that do not have full time assistants? Zero. So if you want to perform at the top level, you need a top level assistant..

Even if you're not in that role at this moment, put yourself in the position of a very busy, very successful executive. You're in the business that you want to be in. You're very excited about it. But you've got to do than you can ever imagine accomplishing in a single day.

For our purposes here, it's very important that you clearly see yourself in that role. Because if you're not there yet, you will be. Make what you're about to learn very personal to yourself.

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Did Gandhi have an assistant? Yes! He was probably the poorest man in history to have a full-time assistant. He used to say, “People keep complaining about how much money it costs to keep me in dire poverty.”

Closer to home, I'm now working with Lee Iacocca. I've been talking with his assistant about Lee Iacocca leading a discussion at a mega-giving event. The assistant knows everything about Mr. Iacocca, including the fact that Iacocca means I am Chairman of the Chrysler Corporation of America! His assistant told me, “Mark, if you want him, you have to do this, this, and this. You have to have money go to his Diabetes Foundation...”

So we're going to do that, based on what we learned from Lee Iacocca's assistant.

Here's a key point to remember: executive assistants want to befriend other executive assistants.

In California, we have a celebrity executive assistant organization. It costs \$450 a year to be a member of. My assistant asked if I would pay the fee, and I said that I

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absolutely would. She goes to a meeting once a month with superstar executive assistants.

Is it a good idea to have instant access to all the top celebrities in Hollywood? I think so. There's also an opportunity to start an executive assistant's organization in Singapore or Tokyo or even Beijing.

My mother was an executive assistant for 50 years. This is something I'm passionate about, because of what my mother taught me. She said if you want access to any executive, you must first access their gatekeeper, which is their assistant.

My mother knows people like Phil Knight the founder of Nike, because every time that Phil Knight wanted to talk to my mom's boss, he had to go through my mother. There were many people like that.

I want to teach you what you look for in an executive assistant. The first requirement is someone who's phenomenal with people, a great communicator, and the type of person powerful people *like to like*.

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For example, everyone likes to like Roice Krueger. People meet him and they like him immediately.

So one of the phenomenal executive assistants that I hired was working as a guest relations manager at the Regal Royal Hotel, which is the only hotel in Osaka that the emperor will ever stay at. I used to stay there when I was on business in Osaka. I would come down in the morning just to sit in the lobby, because people are fascinating to me. I would sit there and watch the activity in the lobby.

Executives of major, multi-national Japanese corporations would come out of the elevator. They would stop at the guest relations desk and they would talk to this particular woman for 5 or 10 minutes before going to work. Every single one of them would talk to her for several minutes. I said to myself, "I've got to hire that person." And I did.

When another executive wants to talk to you, they first pre-qualify you to see if you're somebody that they

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should be spending time with. They do that by having their assistant contact your assistant—and their assistant's impression of your assistant is what is going to dictate their first impression of you before your actual meeting ever takes place. So you want a person who reflects well on you. You want someone who conveys personal dignity, as well as respect and kindness for other people.

They have to dress well too. I want assistants who dress well because they sometimes attend meetings with me, or even on my behalf without me.

### **“The Job Exists to Save Me Time.”**

You need to make this very clear when you interview prospective assistants. Before anything else, the job exists to save you time.

Sometimes that will be lots of fun.

The assistant will meet really cool people, and even hang out with them sometimes.



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But there also things that aren't so much fun. Sometimes your assistant will have to pick up your dry cleaning, because you're so busy and you're traveling around.

So I always try to paint that picture right away in an interview, and ask this question: will you enjoy doing both kinds of work?

Because if they can't, they shouldn't take the job.

My mother used to talk to lots of assistants and secretaries. They'd say, "I'm mad because my boss wants me to make his coffee." She'd think, "Why are they in this job?" Because that is part of the job. A stressed-out executive can't take time for making coffee. It's that simple.

So I tell my executive assistant, "This job is very easy. Just pretend I am the President of the United States and behave accordingly." That is the level of effectiveness I need. I want to produce all the value that I can with the time that I have.

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If I was the president of the United States, would I make my own juice in the morning? It's not going to happen, because I need to focus on things that will pay your salary and mine. Make that clear from the start. Then there will be no surprises later.

The truth is, most people can do most any job on the planet if they really had to and wanted to. So you need to have an absolute belief in the ability of your executive assistant to do marvelous things. In fact, some of the best assistants I have worked with have eventually left to run their own companies. That is how I often lose them. After five years, they look over and say, *"James I've got it! I've been listening to your seminars. I'm going to go do it."*

People who have experience in first rate service industries tend to make great executive assistants. I have hired several from the hotel industry, where they have been dealing with very high level people. They are used to being asked for everything all of the time. When you work in the hotel industry and someone says, "Would

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you bring a cup of coffee up to me?” you don’t complain about it because it is part of the job.

I have also hired assistants who had worked at Disney theme parks. They had already been trained in first class service.

There was one executive assistant that I hired right out of a university. The only place she had ever worked before was at McDonald’s. She was very successful as my assistant, because to her work meant, “I would like two hamburgers, French fries and a chocolate milk shake.” When she heard that order, she just went and filled it. There was no issue of waiting five minutes or even two minutes. So as soon as I gave an instruction to this assistant, she was on her way to do it. She was fabulous. I lost that assistant, unfortunately, because I sold the company that she worked for.

Let me tell you some of the things that my assistants have done for me over the years. I hired a wonderful assistant by the name of Kazumi Terada. She is now helping me to coordinate the summer ball in Monaco

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next year. We have been tasked with organizing the entire event.

When she first came to work for me, she was fresh out of the university, so she knew nothing about work. College is also a really great place to get an assistant, because when you new college graduates don't set any limits for themselves.

When I was in studying aeronautical engineering, we calculated that a bumble bee cannot fly. The wings are too small. It doesn't matter how fast you beat the wings, there won't be enough lift to fly. But nobody has told the bumble bee. New college graduates are a lot like that.

Anyway, she came in and I flew off to the United States to attend some programs—and while I was in the United States somebody decided to crash jet planes into a couple of buildings.

The week after that, we had been planning to bring a group of Japanese CEO's to the United States on a tour.

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She finally got through to me on the telephone, and I was handling a group 60 Americans who woke up in the morning to go on an exercise with me. They hadn't actually heard about the WTC event, so had to share that news with them. So I was pretty busy trying to keep all these people from melting down.

My assistant called me and said, "We are canceling the CEO's trip, right?" I said, "No, you need to get them all here on schedule—and I am way too busy to talk to you. Rope them up, make it happen." There was only one problem. No planes were flying. Meanwhile all the CEO's were going "You want us to fly?"

But to my assistant, this was just work. So she called them and said, "You must show up, it's an absolute must."

It was terrific, because she didn't know any better. This was a great executive assistant in only her second week of work. So they were on the very first airplane that flew anywhere in the United States after 9/11. The first flight that arrived in Honolulu after 9/11 was my

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group of executives. We had Honolulu all to ourselves. The Waikiki Beach was ours, exclusively.

Then I said to my assistant, “I want all these executives to have the experience of flying a helicopter. You need to make it happen.” There was only one problem. Do you think any helicopters were flying the week after 9/11? The Federal Aviation Administration had other ideas. So she was on the phone with the tower at the Honolulu airport every hour on the hour. Can we get permission to take off? Absolutely not! Can we get permission to take off? Absolutely not! She thought this was just work.

The night before we were supposed to fly out, she called the Honolulu airport: “Can we take off? “Yes, you can!” We were the very first civil, non-scheduled aircraft to fly in the United States after 9/11.

My assistant made it all happen, because she didn't know any better. I thought, *“This is great, I've got an assistant who can do anything because she just thinks it's just work.”*

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When I was going to Russia, I wanted to meet Gorbachev. My assistant said to herself, *"Who do I know that speaks Russian, or has ever been to Russia, or knows anybody who is Russian?"* We ended up in an exclusive meeting, eight of us, with Gorbachev, talking about how to bring Russia and Japan together and integrate the economies.

When we went to Thailand, I said, "As long as we are going to Thailand, I want to go into training with the special forces of the Thai military." In order to do that with the schedule we had, we needed to fly an airplane from Bangkok to Lopburi. We would have to land there by private jet. The problem was, no private aircraft had ever landed in Lopburi, ever. If you're not familiar with what's actually there is a bunch of monkeys, and a haunted mountain where the Buddhist priests are there praying every night to get the ghosts to quiet down. And there is the training base for the special forces of the Thai army. This is right after 9/11. Do you think they were really interested in having civilian aircraft come

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into their military air base there? *“It has never happened, they said, and it’s never going to happen.”*

So my assistant called up the commanding officer and said that we will be arriving by private jet. He said, “No, you won’t! Do you want to get shot down?” She said, “No, but we will be arriving by private jet, so here’s the schedule.” He yelled, “What’s up with you? How can you think you will actually be arriving by private jet?” And she says “Because my boss says that is the way it is going to happen.”

We became the first civilian and the only civilian aircraft ever to land at Lopburi.

Would this be a good thing in your life? Having somebody who will do this for you all day long? And can you imagine having to do all that stuff yourself? You would never make it happen.

The final thing that I had her negotiate was a trip with a group of executives to Russia. So many people live in a virtual world. You watch TV, you watch



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movies, and you think you have experienced real life. But you actually have not experienced anything. We see war movies and terrorist movies, but we don't have the physical sensation of what it is like. So I told my assistant, "I want you to arrange for somebody to hijack our bus."

She got in touch with the special forces of the Russian army and spent six months negotiating with them. Finally she got them to consider it. My assistant and I met with the colonel. He was in civilian clothes so nobody would figure out what we were doing. He actually met us at a rest stop where our bus was, so nobody knew who were are talking to. Everyone thought he was another tour guide.

He said, "Are you sure you want to do this?" My guys will be coming on the bus and they'll be shooting off their AK47s. Are you okay with that?" We said, "Yes, that's what we want." He said, "These are not refined city boys. These are rough country guys, really tough people. Are you okay with that?" We said that was fine. He said, "They are physically going to drag your

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people off the bus.” We said, “This is what we want.” He said, “You’re one crazy guy!” I said “Yes I am.” Finally he said, “As long as you’re okay with it, we would love to have your dollars so that we can use them for training.”

They stopped our bus on the highway. There were eight guys from the counter-terrorism unit that had just come back from Chechnya, testosterone bleeding out of every pore. Full camouflage uniforms, firing off the guns. They stop us on the highway. Has anybody got a sense of reality at this point?

When you see a terrorist event on TV you have two dimensions. We had six, minimum! We had three dimensions of space; and we had dimensions of sound that cannot be reproduced in a movie theatre, because any movie theatre on earth would be sued. It took two weeks for our ears to de-compress. When they fire off an AK47, they don’t pass out earplugs in advance. That is one of the things you don’t get in the movies. It was amazing. We had the smell of cordite, the heat of the shell casings hitting us in the face as they pop out the

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side of the gun. The pressure of those guys pushing our heads between our legs.

It was amazing. Eight big dudes dragged us out, then a military truck drove up and they put us in the back of the truck. Heads between our legs, they are pointing our guns at us to in the back of the truck. They drove us onto a military base, dumped us out, and lined us up as if for an execution. Then the camp commander came out and said, "Welcome to our camp."

*These are the kinds of things that your assistant can set up for you!*

Now the three of us would like to do a data dump of the kinds of things that your executive assistant can coordinate for you. Things to organize your life, to save you time, to leverage you, and to take you to the next level. Would that be useful to know?

We'll start with Mr. Roice Krueger: First there are the simple tasks assistants can do. They can do your airline reservations, they can set the hotel reservations,

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and they can also get restaurant reservations. If I have to sit down and do that myself, it consumes very valuable time. That's two, three, or four hours of work. That's a half a day that I am missing. You can also have them go out and do some shopping for you. There are things that you need, whether it is work related or even personal related. They can get a limo to take you where you want to go.

You just have to start making the list of all the things that you don't want to do. They call it "executive assistant" for a reason. Not just because you're an executive, but because they will do some executive tasks. They will do some things and interface with executives that you want to have the capability of a person to do. When I was working at Covey Leadership Center, I had an executive assistant who could interface with Steven Covey—and that required high quality work.

Let me mention one. My mother used to organize all of the board meetings for a very large public company with very powerful people on the board, such as Phil

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Knight from Nike and Gerard Drummond, who one of the movers and shakers in the state of Oregon.

Once she had to cater in the meals for the board, and so she asked the members what they would like to eat. Gerard Drummond was in a bit of a hurry, so he said, “It doesn’t really matter, just make it something we have never had before.” Now, when you’re dealing with world-class people it’s hard to come up with something they haven’t had before.

So my mom looked around, and she saw they were having the meeting next to the Deschutes River there in Oregon. They all arrived by helicopter, and she catered in water buffalo. They said it was the toughest piece of meat they had ever had. But definitely none of them had ever had it before.

You can even have an assistant coordinate things with your relatives, help out with the family reunion, and that type of work. They can also open and sort mail, and they can help you get only the email that you really need to see.

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What about arranging gifts? This is very important, especially when you're traveling internationally. If you go into China you will see that they do the most extraordinary gift giving. You have to have a gift that matches the one you receive, or at least that is the theory.

If you need a second or third executive assistant, there are people you can hire at minimum wage and they will love to do the work. They will work night and day to help you out. I'm talking about interns.

In my town we have this wonderful school called Brigham Young University. I just put the word out through my assistant that I need some help. She went down to the bulletin board in the International Divisions and put up a notice: "International Director for Stephen R. Covey and Associates is looking for some interns."

Overnight we had 30 applications. We hired them for the project. Some of them stayed on by the way, and

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came back to us, and some of them by the way gave us incredible suggestions on how to improve our business.

This is a very inexpensive way of getting people who can help you.

My executive assistant puts together all the information for my income tax return. For example, I need to have a list of all the countries I have traveled to and how many days I was in each. My assistant keeps a running list my entire travel schedule for the year so I don't have to go back and look at my calendar and figure that all out. I also need to have all the statements from my brokers that accumulate through the year. When it comes to the end of the year, I just take the file that my assistant put together, hand it to the accountants and it is done.

Since I travel a lot, I could actually spend quite a bit of time is packing my luggage. But now I just tell my assistant what I will need on a trip and I am off to my next task. My bag is perfectly packed. It is ready to go when it is time to leave.

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When I hired one of my assistants, she asked me a very difficult question: “What is the most difficult task in the job?” I said, “Doing my airline reservations.” She laughed, but she doesn’t laugh anymore. When you’re extremely busy and trying to play at a high level, getting the flight schedule exactly right really matters.

For example, if I am flying to the United States, and if I need to go to New York, where do I want to stop so I can get three other things done in the same trip? Is it the most leverage for me to go to San Francisco? Is it the most leverage for me to fly through Portland? Give me a number of different flight plans through so I can evaluate which one is going to be the most effective. You could never get that done alone.

We just had my oldest brother’s 70<sup>th</sup> birthday and my assistant helped with so many people who came in for that. We are now scheduling my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, which will be a monumental event on January 8<sup>th</sup>.



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I love to have really good parties. I was married for 27 years, and we got re-married every year for 27 years. When we did that we had great parties. We hired The Shirelles—they sang “going to the chapel, and we’re going to get married”—and other stuff that no one else ever does. So I want to see what is over the top that I can do for my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. My assistant will coordinate all that and make sure that we deliver it right.

My assistant has to coordinate my schedule with everyone else involved in a specific event. Most of them then go on different lists, depending on how we value them. If they are on the “A” party list they get invited to every great event that we are doing—red carpet events and all kinds of other stuff. And you want to have an “A” party list. You want to make sure your “A” list knows about an event way in advance. Your assistant handles that.

Henry Kissinger used to say, “I drive my staff crazy because I keep changing my schedule while I am moving.” I’m the same way. Sometimes I don’t even know what’s most important. You need your secretary

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as your mastermind; she sees the future and coordinates everything. Her job is making my life effortless.

There are three kinds of stress: there's de-stress which will kill you and wreck you and make you get old and sick and die. There's also normal stress, which is everyday wear and tear. But the only stress I am willing to live with at this time of my life is positive stress—being the best I can be. My assistant has to get rid of the negative stress. If something has gone wrong, she has to tell me early, when it is a snowball and not an avalanche. And she has got to be smart enough to do it.

How smart is my assistant? She is a doctor. She used to handle head and neck trauma injuries, so the kind of stuff I give her is nothing compared to somebody in a car accident. My stuff is a piece of cake. As we said, you can go with someone very young, or with a much more senior person like my assistant.

I do a lot of TV events and radio events. All of the negotiations for that are done by my assistant. She

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negotiates decides whether it is a good opportunity or not.

When I actually show up at a TV event, she has all the things I need—finger nail clippers, contact lenses, everything I need to be immaculate and presentable. She always has my tuxedo pressed, because my entire TV persona in Japan is in a tuxedo: “Oh, it’s the foreigner in the tuxedo again.” So she has my tuxedo ready, multiple options of bow ties, shoes shined, everything ready to go.

The events we do in Japan are absolutely insane. We go from nine in the morning to five a.m. the next day.

My assistant coordinates an entire team whose only objective is to make sure that I stay physically alive during the event (which is actually a very serious topic.) It actually requires a team of four people to pull it off. So you can ask anybody that has ever been to one of my events: if I stick out my hand, they know exactly what needs to appear in my hand.

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It just blows the minds of everybody who sees it.

All these things are known as discernments. If you want to get rich, you got to have better discernments. Discernments mean you've got freedom. Without freedom, you can't be an executive. Because sooner or later you're going to have a crisis, and you can't be burned out or too exhausted to solve the problem.

My assistant goes back stage with the chef, making sure when the lunch break comes my food is there. We know what the menu is for every meal during an entire program. It's all specially designed exactly for me, for maximum energy. It arrives before I stop speaking. While the announcements are being made to the audience about the meal, I am actually finishing eating so that I can spend all my time with the participants. The participants in my programs in Japan have actually never seen me eat, because I am always done before they actually get to leave the room. They I get to spend my time, going around taking questions, taking photos, and signing autographs.

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I do a mega-event every month for about 1000 people. We have private dining, and we also have superstars show up at private dining who are friends of mine. My executive assistant has to get all of those people there.

We also do a mega-event in Japan every year. We bring superstars in the speaking industry—John Gray and so forth. I am on stage when they arrive at the airport so my assistant meets them and makes sure they are taken care of—that their hotel check-in is effortless, and everything is in the room that they need.

Once we had 16 presenters in eight days. My assistants had to coordinate for sixteen people while taking care of me and making sure that everything was completely effortless and smooth.

We had two or three executive assistants and we found that it was best to spin one of them off for this kind of work full-time. As you grow, you might find yourself having three or four executive assistants but each will take on different titles and rolls.

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I have one person who is my executive assistant only for Singapore. I have one who is my assistant for Japan, and one in the US who is now coordinating all my guest speakers. I have another assistant who is my housekeeper, who makes sure everything is correctly set up. I get up every morning to train for the triathlon and my green drink is already set on my bike. All I have to do is get up and go.

All my executive assistants have check sheets to see what they are doing. If something doesn't get done, they go back to the check sheet. If you didn't check off everything, it is not my fault. It is your fault. We've agreed to what you're going to do, it's got to be done. And it has got to be done at zero defect.

When the airplane is landing, I want the hydraulics and the wheels to come down 100% of the time. Making a 170 million dollar plane crash land is not a good idea.

I'm running a hundred million dollar business, I can't afford to crash land. It's not okay. This is a zero

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defect business. We also have back-up, or redundancy, so if my assistant is on vacation or holiday we are covered. She gets six weeks a year, because I want my staff to have lots of holidays, and they earn it. Meanwhile everything stays at zero defect.

Let me just underscore this: executive assistants are very valuable to almost anything that you do in business. You create their work process and you organize it into a system. That is what the checklist is for, so that if the assistant becomes unavailable the system will still be in place.

I hope you have gotten a picture of how seamless is you want this person to make your life. There is a flip side to this: you need to be ready to occasionally WOW your assistants, because they are going to WOW you.

There needs to be reciprocity. For example, my assistant in Japan wanted to go to Hawaii on her vacation. She said, "Can I take next week?" I have never denied my assistants a vacation anytime they have wanted one. They are intelligent enough to know when

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mission critical stuff is going on in my life, so they never ask and the wrong time. I said, “Yes, take a vacation. Where are you staying?” She named the hotel and I said, “You need to do better than that. Get the best hotel in Hawaii, and stay there; I will pay the difference.” Those are the kinds of things you want to do, so on occasion the assistant can live at the same level as the boss. You should show that you care that much.

Ideally, you need your assistant to understand what you want, and do it before you even know you need it done. This is my system to make that happen.

Once a year I sit down with my executive assistant, with a list of my personal goals and my professional goals and I say, “Here is what I am all about this year and this is what I would like you to assist me in getting accomplished.” Now my assistant was completely aware of everything I was doing, and of all the major goals of my life. Then we would meet at a minimum once a month and say these are the major things I am accomplishing now. We’d not only talk about the goals, but would also schedule events three months or six



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months ahead, depending upon how busy the schedule was. They always knew my priorities of my significant goals. Every a week we would also communicate, even if only by email, so that my priorities were clear and the assistant could execute against those priorities.

This brings discipline in your personal life. If you're not organized, you can't expect an assistant to be organized. And if they are messing up because you're not organized, who is responsible? I always gave my assistants permission to come in and say, "Roice, you haven't scheduled a time to talk about the priorities, so could we take care of that today?"

When you do that, you have a highly empowered assistant that is out there like a heat seeking missile trying to figure out how to blow up the problems that are coming towards you, and helping you to keep focus on what is truly important in your life.

Even in my absence my assistant could act against the priorities. They would understand what the priority was and if there is a project or an issue that I needed

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resolved they always knew about it, and they could always help me get to a resolution of the problem.

We could probably talk about this subject forever, because we are totally passionate about it and it is absolutely necessary to your success. So find great assistants and wow them, and they will wow you a hundred times over.

With best wishes,

James Skinner, Roice Krueger, Mark Victor Hansen

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