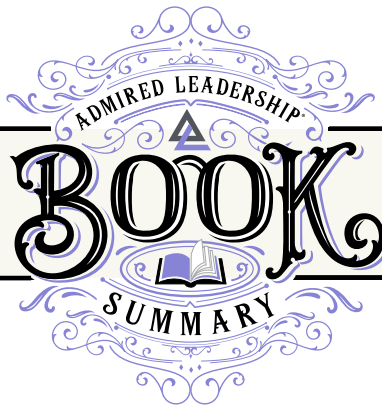




Eight Minutes, Not Eight Hours



September 2022

# Work Clean

What Great Chefs Can Teach Us About Organization

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In his book **Work Clean**, award-winning business and culture writer Dan Charnas describes how **mise-en-place** – a philosophy that chefs and other culinary professionals use to plan, prepare, and organize under high-stress situations – transcends kitchen work. In fact, this approach can help all of us be the best possible versions of ourselves. The author interviewed over 100 chefs, cooks, culinary students, and instructors to understand precisely how this philosophy is taught and carried out in their work. Then Charnas describes how we can apply this organizational system to transition our professional and personal lives from chaotic scramble to elegant routine.

## Key Quote

*“By being organized, you will be more efficient. By being more efficient, you will have more time in your day. By having more time in your day, you will be more relaxed in your day; you will be able to accomplish the task at hand in a clear, concise, fluid motion” (p. 7). — Dan Charnas*

## Key Points

**Focus: How Mise-en-Place Works.** Training at the Culinary Institute of America and working at well-run restaurants involves understanding and embracing the concept of mise-en-place. Mis-en-place is the elegant and detailed culinary system for running a big or small kitchen. It creates a “Zen-like” sense of order, cleanliness, and peace in the midst of intense endeavors. The principles of mise-en-place can provide a guide for how we manage the rest of life.

**Chaos: How We Work Without Mis-en-Place.** Well-intentioned, hardworking, honorable people who have no system in place for handling their daily tasks find life overwhelming, obligations unmet, and stress ruling the day. “Preparation,” “process,” and “presence” – the basic values of mise-en-place – can transform the tenor and productivity of your life.

**The First Ingredient: Planning is Prime.** A good chef aims to have all of his ingredients needed for the whole day ready **before** it gets started. Chefs plan timelines, and when they do, they are realistic about what it will take. Putting planning first allows you to “greet the day” rather than stumbling into it in a panic from the beginning (p. 44).


**The Second Ingredient: Arranging Spaces, Perfecting Movements.** A good chef does not allow time or movement to go to waste. He has planned and prepped his workspace, having everything ready at the elbow so that he uses the least time and energy necessary. Perfecting movements means not squandering energy or thought – it’s an economy of space, commitment to a place, and a sense of purpose and restraint. Whether it is your desk space, digital work, or errands and tasks, “audit your space” to conserve movement (p. 75).

**The Third Ingredient: Cleaning as You Go.**


Good chefs believe the act of cleaning as you work helps maintain an “optimal” state of mind in all of cooking. Keep your kitchen, workspace, project bench – whatever the space – clean and in good order, and keep out only what you are using. Cleaning “as you go is a commitment to keeping order through disorder” (p. 89).

**The Fourth Ingredient: Making First Moves.**

“The first moment counts more than the later ones” (p. 102). For example, in busy kitchens, good chefs line up the pans and start them heating before the orders come in, not after they prep the food to go in the pans. This approach is both a time saver and a visual reminder of all the things that need to be done so that when things get very busy, the parts are ready for the process to move along. In life, consider when tasks should be started to economize on time later.



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**The Fifth Ingredient: Finishing Actions.** Good chefs finish a job they have started and deliver on that promise, knowing there are “hidden costs” to stopping and starting. Evaluate how each task on your plate measures up in terms of expectation and ease, and prioritize accordingly to both “practical” and “political” benefits (pp. 123-125).

**The Sixth Ingredient: Slowing Down to Speed Up.** “If you’re running, it’s because you aren’t prepared” (p. 138). Chefs go out of their way to cultivate a smooth, Zen-like focus that keeps them emotionally and physically calm. In your life, practice talking slower, moving slower and more purposefully, and taking time to breathe (p. 146).

**The Seventh Ingredient: Open Eyes and Ears.** A good chef balances focus on a task with what is happening around them. They “tune their senses” to hear and see not everything single thing but what is important. At work, do the same. Ask yourself, “What things in your workspace need more attention, and what need less” (pp. 153, 158)?


**The Eight Ingredient: Call and Callback.** Communication is key to making the “dance” of a working kitchen happen effectively and smoothly. Good chefs value necessary details as well as succinctness. At work, use this principle to streamline and consolidate the communications at your desk, whether e-mail, text, social media, etc.

**The Ninth Ingredient: Inspect and Correct.** Good chefs critique themselves, are open to critique from other people, and “fix and use mistakes” (p. 190). In your work life, use bosses, friends, employees, and mentors to provide feedback to help you grow and improve.


**The Tenth Ingredient: Total Utilization.** Good chefs abhor waste of any kind – of food, motion, time, and staff. Everything matters. They take pains to train staff and ensure they are doing the task they are best suited for. In your own life, ask yourself questions designed to make the most out of your workspace, your tasks, your resources, and even your relationships (p. 214).

**Working Clean as a Way of Life.** To bring the decades-long proven principles of mise-en-place into your life, you need to be committed to a daily planning session, a process for improvement, and to being truly “present” in whatever you do.

**The Work Clean System.** One person can only do a few things well, and prioritizing is one way to embrace mise-en-place in your life. Establish very few “missions” to achieve within three arenas – “work,” “family,” and “self.” You should aim for about ten total personal missions (two to four significant mission assignments per arena). Within each mission, determine which tasks should be on the “front-burner” to be done first and which ones come next. Develop and schedule routines to help you achieve your front-burner items.



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**A Day of Working Clean.** A good day requires preparation the night before. “Clean your station,” whether that is your desktop, your inbox, your purse, your social media accounts, voicemails, texts, etc. Adjust your calendar and action item list for tomorrow, and ensure front-burner action items are first. Finally, plan your schedule for the next day. At the beginning of the new day, reflect or meditate or talk with your spouse and kids, give yourself time for your commute, so you aren’t flustered, spend time doing process work, and purpose to finish everything you start or make a plan to do so if you are unable to. “Clean as you go” – flag and clear your inbox all day. Reflect on your day and inspect and correct your work.

#### **Key Concepts:**

### **THE POWER OF WORKING CLEAN**

To work clean means to work consciously and efficiently and to apply the concept of “mise-en-place.” Mise-en-place translates to “put in place” and means “the preparation and assembly of ingredients, pans, utensils, and plates or serving pieces needed for a particular dish or service period” (p. 4).

When practiced consistently, mise-en-place becomes a set of values (p. 11):

- Apprentice oneself.
- Work with intensity.
- Cultivate a sense of urgency.
- Remain alert.
- Aim for perfection.

Great chefs have been practicing mise-en-place for decades, inside the kitchen and out, to effectively organize their professional and personal lives. Charnas outlines how we can apply these concepts to the business world and everyday life to increase our efficiency and capacity to stay calm amidst the chaos.

Working clean doesn't just entail organizing the objects around us. It needs to deal with our internal environment as well. It's not just an intellectual exercise; we must also know how to handle the mental, emotional, and physical challenges we face.

We need more than strategies and systems; we need guiding principles that account for all human dimensions (p. 32).

So what does work in the kitchen have to do with work in the office?

"Workers in both places must contend with a deluge of tasks under tremendous deadline pressure and often inadequate resources. In both environments, workers face a constant stream of inputs and requests, too little time to process them, and many tasks demanding simultaneous attention" (p. 33).

There are three central values that mise-en-place embodies:

**Preparation:** Plan ahead thoroughly and constantly and take advantage of every resource available. Give yourself the satisfaction of having done all you can to set yourself up for success. Be sure to set aside 30 minutes at the end of the day to plan for tomorrow. Keep your workspace clean, and everything else will follow from that (p. 226).

**Process:** Ensure excellent execution by tirelessly searching for the best process to complete the tasks at hand. Great chefs believe that process is about becoming a high-functioning human and being happier for it. A great process should not only make the work better but make you better. Excellence arises from refining good processes and constantly asking, "How can I do this better, easier, or with less waste" (pp. 226-227)?

**Presence:** Commit to being present and to adjusting your preparation and process to the changing circumstances around you, like a surfer riding the waves. After months and years of repeated preparation and strategy, great chefs become one with their work, and their work becomes a kind of meditation. Be intentional about not doing mindless, personal tasks when bored at work, and don't check your work email when you're playing with your kids. Wherever you are, train your brain to be all in (pp. 37-40, 229).

## THE INGREDIENTS OF WORKING CLEAN

**Plan:** Commit to being honest with your time and plan daily. In order to be honest with your time, you need to be honest about how long tasks will actually take you and make the tough decisions about what ideas to kill. Chefs are great executives because they execute, killing off the non-essential in favor of the essential (pp. 43-60).



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**Arrange Spaces, Perfect Movements:** Remove “friction” and commit to arranging your station to reduce impediments to your movements and activities. Doing so will allow you to do more faster and preserve your energy for other things. For chefs, the slightest amount of friction will slow them down significantly and undermine their ability to achieve excellence (pp. 61-84).

**Clean As You Go:** Commit to maintaining your system. Making your plan, gathering your resources, and arranging your space are crucial aspects of creating a system. But **maintaining** this system is the actual test of mise-en-place. Constantly clean and put objects back in their designated place as you work. A holistic view of cleaning creates the foundation for excellence in the kitchen and in the office (pp. 85-99).

**Make First Moves:** Start now and commit to using time to your benefit. A first move creates momentum and an initial staging area for future progress. Live by the rule that if you can't fully execute now, make one small move toward completion. Making first moves **now** has the potential to save you many moves later and a lot of time in the future (pp. 100-109).

**Finish Actions:** Excellence is “quality, delivered,” so commit to following through and finishing nearly done tasks. Don't give into fatigue, restlessness, frustration, and deluded confidence by pausing projects or deciding to finish them later. If you start something, finish it. For chefs, a dish that is 90 percent done might as well be zero percent done. Leaving projects unfinished creates “orphaned tasks,” things that take up physical and mental space because they are set aside to be resumed later (pp. 116-134).

**Slow Down to Speed Up:** Work clean with your emotions.

Use physical order to restore mental order and work smoothly and steadily. There is a big difference between hustling and rushing, between a sense of urgency and outright panic. Calm your mind and extend the time by moving smoothly and deliberately (pp. 117-132).

**Open Eyes and Ears:** Stay alert by balancing internal and external awareness. We can be aware and even interrupted and still be creative by selecting what we pay attention to and what we don't. Accepting that interruptions exist allows us to work with them, as opposed to against them (pp. 133-163).

**Call and Callback:** In high-pressure situations, communication and confirmation systems are vital to collaboration and efficient teamwork. Work clean with communication by treating everyone's time like a precious commodity. Maintain one stream of information that is clear, concise, and respectful. All communications should be confirmed with specificity for accuracy and memory (pp. 165-176).

**Inspect and Correct:** Commit to coaching yourself, being coached, and coaching others. Evaluate work – yours and others – to refine methods and incorporate the knowledge gained from failures. In other words, work clean with feedback and create a culture of checks and balances to inspect and correct work on an ongoing basis (pp. 177-196).

**Total Utilization:** Waste nothing; instead, value space, time, energy, resources, and people. Focus and order are the by-products of the values and behaviors of mise-en-place, and the behaviors themselves are all geared towards eliminating waste (pp. 200-218).



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## WORKING CLEAN AS A WAY OF LIFE

Excellence requires commitment, and commitment demands adherence to mise-en-place, your practice, and your system (p. 224). "Excellence requires human presence" (p. 271).

Take a half-hour to clear your plate and plan your day. This will unpack everything that is cluttering your mind, devices, bags, and body (p. 225).

Commit to a system that helps you improve and that makes you follow the schedule you've set for yourself. Use checklists and cultivate improved techniques (p. 227).

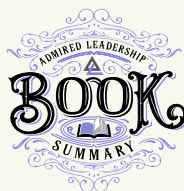
Everything we do in life (thinking, writing, correspondence, procedures, errands, conferences, meetings, chores, etc.) is action. Tasks and appointments are the same. There are only two types of actions: scheduled and unscheduled (p. 235). Favor scheduled actions in order to plan and be prepared.

Every mission or goal requires actions to achieve it. In a chef's world, these actions are the ingredients. The difference between chefs and other professionals is that chefs spend a lot more time planning and scheduling their actions, allowing them to handle chaos and fight distractions (p. 238).

Routines are essentially an empty template of your ideal week. They are different from scheduled actions in that they are meant to be a loose framework beneath your schedule (p. 241).

Working clean means committing to integrating the behaviors of mise-en-place into your life. Respect your abilities and limitations by planning honestly. Reserve brainpower by creating ergonomic workspaces that allow efficiency to flow freely. And lastly, fully commit to mise-en-place by cleaning as you go to maintain your system (p. 231).

Charnas, Dan. (2016) **Work Clean:** The Life-changing Power of Mise-en-Place to Organize Your Life, Work, and Mind. San Francisco: Portfolio Penguin.



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### The Latest and Greatest Books for Leaders

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After reading a good summary, we believe leaders are able to make better choices as to what to ignore, what to peruse and what to make the time to read closely.