

353 - How to Plan a Project and Actually Finish It

Hi there! You're listening to The Lazy Genius Podcast! I'm Kendra Adachi, and I'm here to help you be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't!

Today is episode 353 - How to Plan a Project and Actually Finish It. Listen to me. There's nothing wrong with starting a project and not finishing it or living with many projects in various states of completion. Literally zero is wrong with that. This episode is simply a path for you to follow if not finishing a project is getting on your nerves enough to change it, if it's affecting your quality of life, you know? Even though there's nothing wrong with living with unfinished projects, maybe you just don't want to.

In this episode, I'm going to share the four characteristics of a project so you know how to spot one (weirdly important) and then 7 steps to finishing a project.

Let's jump in.

First, let's talk about the four characteristics of a project. Number one, there is one main objective. A project has a purpose or an end game. Number two, a project has an end. Projects are not like hobbies where you're always working on the thing or like a routine that's recurring. Projects have an end. Number three, a project is out of your ordinary. It is outside of your daily and weekly rhythms which is one of the biggest challenges in finishing a project! It's out of your ordinary and needs special attention. And number four, a project requires more than one decision or action. It's made up of multiple pieces and parts. So it has a main purpose, an end date, it's out of your ordinary, and it requires more than one decision or action.

Let's look at some examples of what is and isn't a project.

Is reorganizing your kitchen cabinets a project? Let's see. First, it does have a main objective, something like being able to access your stuff more easily. Two, once those cabinets are reorganized, you're done, right? So it does have an end. Three, it is definitely outside of your ordinary. My guess is you don't normally spend time in the kitchen pulling everything out of cabinets and putting it back in again. Also because of the rhythms that do exist in a kitchen on a daily, often multiple times a day, basis, doing anything that disrupts the kitchen is not only going to be out of your ordinary but impact the ordinary that actually happens there. And four, it requires more than one decision or action. Absolutely it does. You have to empty multiple cabinets and decide where all the categories go. You have to decide what you'll make for lunch or dinner or whatever meal is next after having upended your kitchen to reorganize. You have to decide what items to keep and which ones to get rid of. You have to put everything back. Lots of decisions and actions. So this checks all four boxes. Reorganizing your kitchen cabinets is a project.

Is planning a party or a gathering of some kind a project? It has a single purpose, to get the people together for something. Two, it does have an end. Once the gathering is over, so is the

project. Three, it is out of your ordinary. If you don't normally have people over or you don't normally have this many people over, it's for sure different than your usual rhythms. And four, it does have multiple decisions and actions. Who will you invite, what will you do, what food will be there, who is bringing other stuff... all kinds of decisions and actions. So having a party or a gathering is a project.

Now, let's say you have dinner with a family or a group of friends every third Friday or something. Yes, there's a purpose behind it and yes, when the gathering is over, it's over and yes, you still have to decide where to eat and do certain things. But if this meal or gathering is already in your rhythm, it's not really a project is it? If you're a person who always gets coffee with a group of friends on the first Saturday morning of the month or you regularly have dinner with your sister's family who lives down the street, even if it's not always on the same day, that gathering is not out of the ordinary. It is not really a project. And it doesn't feel like a project either, does it? It's just like paying the bills or vacuuming the floor but definitely more fun. It's something you regularly do which means if you procrastinate, it'll likely still happen because it's not only part of your rhythm but other people's, too.

See the difference? When it comes to a project, all four of these characteristics need to be true. That way you can approach the thing specifically as a project. Now, if you're hearing these examples and you're thinking about things that aren't technically projects - like paying bills - but they still seem stressful like an undone project, my guess is that it's because that thing isn't in a rhythm. Even though your bills have to be paid every month, you haven't systemized the regularity of paying those bills. They might actually feel like a project because they feel out of your ordinary. That's why I love these four characteristics. They help you see why some things that are "supposed to be" regular don't feel like it. They feel like projects, and you're sitting in a slew of ones that are undone. In the smallest steps, notice what tasks that feel like projects need a little systemizing so they're more in your ordinary rhythm. That's just a little side note tip there.

Alright, so those are the four characteristics of a project: it has an objective, it has an end, it's out of your ordinary, and it requires multiple decisions or actions.

Now, since I'm sure you've got one on your mind even now as you're listening, let's talk about the 7 steps to finishing a project.

Step one when finishing a project is very small, and it is to make a plan to access the project. Make a plan to access the project. The first step isn't to assess. It's to schedule a time to assess. We've got to start that small. You intuitively know you need to spend some time thinking about how to prepare for your kids' summer clothes needs, how to finally be done refinishing that table you bought at an estate sale, how to finish reorganizing your closet since you haven't thoughtfully organized it since you moved into your home... you know there are things to think about, but knowing you should think about them and actually taking the time to think about them

are two different things. That's why step one is literally to make a plan to assess your project. Put an appointment on your calendar or just decide that this Saturday morning while you're drinking your coffee you're going to sit down with the rest of these steps and think through your project. But step one is to make a plan to assess.

Step two is to assess the objective. Has the reason you wanted to start this project changed? Is the purpose different? I think this happens a lot in our homes especially. We get Big Black Trash Bag Energy where we are just fed up with some kind of chaos in our house, and whether it's because of a busy season, hormones, or stepping on one too many broken Crayons, we rage and loudly declare that things are going to be different around here. Then we get big project energy and feel compelled to organize the toy cabinet or all the kitchen cabinets or find a new place to hang coats and since you can't find your perfect solution, you access your inner carpenter who only has ideas and not a lot of skill and you end up buying supplies that sit on the floor for awhile. That energy is probably very familiar. We often declare the beginning of a project because of an understandable frustration in our regular lives. But without naming the real purpose of a project, we'll get swept up in whatever frustration we were feeling when we were emotionally, physically, or hormonally compromised, and now we're in the middle of an unfinished project we don't actually care about anymore. So that's why step two is to assess the objective. Why did you want to do this project, and do you want to finish it for the same reason? Maybe you do still want to complete the project, but you have a different reason. Name the reason. Name the purpose. Name the objective for this project so you'll have a renewed sense of why you want to finish it in the first place.

So step one is to schedule a time to assess the project, step two is to assess the purpose or objective, and step three is to confirm the end. All projects have an end, right? So name when this project will end. It could be when a particular thing is done, like when all the new doorknobs are installed, or it could be a specific end date. You're hosting extended family over spring break, and you want your guest room to be finished in time for that. That's a project, and it needs an end. So confirm the end. Maybe you had an end date and need to change it. Maybe your expectations of what "finished" means are too high and your end needs to be a bit more manageable. Regardless of what it means specifically for your project and your season of life, confirm the end.

Step four, set aside time for the project. Listen to me. Because a project is out of the ordinary, you cannot work on it and definitely cannot finish it without setting aside specific time. The rhythms and responsibilities of your daily life will fill up those days so easily. It's rare that any of us have this stretch of free time in front of us with the energy to do something productive with it. Projects must be planned.

If you have confirmed your objective for your project, you really know why you want to do it and why it's worth it, and you've given yourself an end, set aside time for it. Block off some time in your calendar so you can give it the time you want to give it. It doesn't have to be one huge day to finish the project at once. It could be an hour a week over the next six weeks to do a little bit at a time. Our next step, step five, will help you see what those little bits are.

But here's why we set aside time before we move to step five and see what there is to do. If you can't find time to set aside for this project, maybe now isn't the season for this project. If you just don't see how you can grab this hour here or this half day there, maybe now is not the season. Part of setting aside time is making sure you have the time in the first place.

Step five, break down the decisions and the actions. Here's where the rubber meets the road. Every project requires multiple decisions and actions. Buying gifts for your kids' teachers at the end of the year is a project, and it requires multiple decisions and actions. You have to decide who you're giving a gift to - is it just their regular teachers or their encore teachers or the front office or other staff members? Then you have to decide what to give them and if everyone gets the same thing. Then you have to get the stuff, wrap it if you're going to wrap it, and figure out how to deliver it. See all those decisions and actions? That's a project.

Listen to me right now. You can't put a project on your to-do list. You cannot put "get teacher gifts" on your to-do list. Or "finish the guest bedroom" or "make the yard prettier" or "plan summer vacation." All of those are way too big to put on a to-do list because all of them are made up of too many pieces and parts. A project is not a singular task, but you might be treating it like one. That's probably why it's still unfinished. You know why it matters and you know when it's done, but you're putting something that contains multiple decisions and actions into one phrase that just keeps getting moved from to-do list to to-do list. Make sense? So if you have a project in your life and you have gone through the other four steps already, the next thing you need to do is break down the project into decisions and actions. You can start from the beginning and walk through what you'll need to decide and do, or you can start from the end of the project and reverse engineer how to get everything done. You're not scheduling these decisions and actions. You're just seeing them all as individual things. And don't ignore the decision part of this. Actions are easier to see, but decisions often inform what those actions are. Be sure you're paying attention to what you need to decide, not just what you need to do.

As you make this list, you'll want to make the pieces and parts small enough so that each one does not feel overwhelming. Maybe all together the list of decisions and actions feels overwhelming, but depending on the size of the project, there might be a lot to do. That's why people who do any kind of home renovation are so weary by the end. Decision fatigue has come to town, and you just can't anymore. But the smaller you make your decisions and actions, the more likely you are to get everything done. Plus, there's more to mark off and it's easier to see your progress.

Let's go back to the guest room example. Let's say you've been writing "finish guest room" on your list for weeks and weeks. That's too big, right? Way too big. Even something like "get a new dresser" could be too big if you haven't yet *decided* what style you want, how much you want to spend, and where you want to look. You might loosely have the idea in your head that you'd love to find something secondhand and maybe even paint it because that seems fun, but what if you don't already have a rhythm of visiting your local thrift stores? What if you don't normally paint furniture? If you're not already in the habit of looking or if you don't have the tools

or skills for painting furniture, that doesn't mean you can't get a secondhand dresser, but it does mean you'll have more decisions and actions to complete your project and therefore you'll need more time. You'll need more time because you've never done this before. And that's just for the dresser, not the entire room. You see what I mean? It might sound a little nuts, but you need to decide even how much time you're willing to spend looking for a piece of furniture. Otherwise, you're going to wait too long and get too close to that end date you've set, and then you'll be throwing together a room that doesn't reflect your style or what matters to you.

Are you seeing it? Projects require multiple decisions and tasks. And unless you break that project down into those individual decisions and then the individual tasks that come out of those decisions, you will sit on an unfinished project for a long time. Or you'll be forced to finish the project in a way you don't really love.

So that's step five. Break it down.

Step six is to schedule the next couple of things. There's a chance your list of decisions and actions will be long depending on the project. That's okay. That's normal even. Don't feel the pressure to decide everything now (that won't work anyway), and don't feel the pressure to schedule each task now either. Instead, step six is to schedule the next couple of things. Look at your list and pick a couple of things on it that make the most sense to do next, and use the time you already set aside in step four to do those next couple of things. Once they're done, schedule the next couple of things in time you already set aside or in new times you add. Start small is what I'm saying. Just a couple of tasks at a time in the time you already allotted.

And finally, step seven: keep checking in. Keep your list of decisions and tasks close at hand, and maybe look at it once a week when you're looking at your schedule, when you're figuring out carpool, or when you're meal planning. Find a regular, pre-existing time when you're already doing some sort of planning, and check in on your project then. If you don't keep checking in, you'll lose momentum. Is that awful? No. You'll survive a loss of momentum. But if you'd like to keep your project going and cross the finish line for it, keep checking in.

So to recap, our seven steps to finishing a project are make a plan to assess the project, assess the objective, confirm the end date, set aside time for the project, break down the decisions and actions, schedule the next couple of things, and keep checking in.

And that's how to plan a project and actually finish it.

Before we go, let's celebrate the Lazy Genius of the Week! This week it's Laura Allen with a wildly relatable food prep idea. Laura writes this, "You know all those perfectly crunchy, salty tiny tortilla chip pieces that get left at the bottom of the bag? At our house, there's always a LOT of those after my boys devour late night chips & salsa. Enter my stroke of genius one day: I date a gallon plastic bag, and each time the boys plow through another bag of tortilla chips, I add the remnants to the bag. These make a great base for a southwest casserole or toppings for a taco salad, tortilla soup or chili! I feel like I'm getting more bang for my buck and not wasting half the

quantity in the original chip bag! Plus, I love the extra crunch it adds to whatever dish I add these!”

Isn't this a great idea! We all know about the chip crumbs. I'm going to start doing this because Annie prefers the crumbs. When we have nachos for dinner, she'll make what she called a nacho scramble where she'll crumble up her chips and mix the pieces together with meat and cheese. And then eats it with a spoon like a tiny weirdo. Now I'm just going to keep a bag of the bottom of the bag crumbs for her. Thanks for the idea, Laura, and congratulations on being the Lazy Genius of the Week!

This episode is hosted by me, Kendra Adachi, and executive produced by Kendra Adachi, Jenna Fischer, and Angela Kinsey. The Lazy Genius Podcast is enthusiastically part of the Office Ladies Network. Thanks so much for listening, and until next time, be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. I'll see you next week!