

Create Structure and Routine to be Effective Amid the Chaos

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A photograph of two men in a professional setting. On the left, a Black man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark blue blazer over a light blue button-down shirt, is smiling and gesturing with his right hand. On the right, a white man with glasses and a beard, wearing a dark blue button-down shirt, is looking towards the first man. They appear to be in a meeting or discussion. The background is a bright, out-of-focus office environment.

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In college, I worked as a prep cook at a restaurant. The chef had French training and emphasized the importance of "mise-en-place"—a French term for "everything in its place."

Mise-en-place is a system chefs use to prepare themselves and their kitchens in the hours leading up to mealtime. The "Meez," as professionals refer to it, involves studying recipes, making lists of necessary ingredients, prepping food, and assembling the tools necessary for cooking that day's menu.

The Meez is utilitarian, but it runs deeper than that. In his book *Kitchen Confidential*, Anthony Bourdain writes: "The universe is in order when your station is set."

Although it's been a long time since I worked at a stainless-steel countertop, the Meez is a mindset that has played an important role in my life and work—and I bet it can for you too.

I'm more likely to work out if I lay my clothes and shoes out the night before. I'm more organized at work when I make my to-do list the day before. The "Meez Mindset" helps me plan for what's coming next.

Putting everything in its place means prioritizing and focusing only on the essential; separating what should be done from what could be done.

The problem is that most lawyers begin their days in reactive mode rather than being proactive about their priorities.

What's the first thing most lawyers do when they get to the office? They open up email, listen to voicemails, and begin tabbing through web browsers—often all at the same time. These types of activities are productivity killers. Some, like web surfing, are distractions that eat away at your time. Others, like checking email, have the potential to entirely disrupt the precious time you have to prepare yourself for the hard work of the day ahead.

The only thing you'll find in an email is a demand or request reflecting someone else's priorities. Those types of distractions can and should wait if you're serious about making progress. Almost everything you'll find in email can wait for at least an hour, so reserve the first hour of your day for yourself.

Start each day with a brief ten-minute planning session—your own Meez. Better yet, plan further in advance. Use the ten minutes at the end of each day to plan for the next one. That way you can head home with a clear head, confident that you will be ready to hit the ground running in the morning.

Making a list may seem like a simple process. It's something you may already do in the course of your day. But not all lists are created equal. Many lawyers' lists resemble something one would use at the grocery store, consisting of 20, 30, or more items with no regard to priority. Occasionally, a lawyer will reshuffle and recompose their running list, and also add to it. Their list doesn't reflect what they will get done on a particular day. Instead, it consists of everything— big, small, important, trivial—that is on their plate. So, keep it simple. Identify no more than three important things that you will accomplish on any given day. For many lawyers, identifying a single priority is even better, because we all know that urgent demands may, and likely will, arise and inevitably pull you off task.

Next, block time on your calendar for when you'll get your work done. Dedicate sufficient time to your most important tasks, like business development and getting that brief done. Try to get this type of work done early in the day, when your mind is fresh, and energy is high. Reserve your administrative work, such as timekeeping and responses to non-urgent emails, for later in the afternoon.

The point is, plan your days. Create structure for yourself amid the whirlwind of law firm life. There's plenty to react to—and if you're not careful that's all you'll do. Take a hint from the great chefs and build some Meez into your daily routine.

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