

# Detox Your Desk

Declutter your  
life and mind

Theo Theobald & Cary L. Cooper

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# **DETOX YOUR DESK**

**De-clutter your life and mind**

BY THEO THEOBALD AND CARY COOPER



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This book is dedicated to the terminally  
untidy  
(that's most of us!)

The authors would like to thank and, acknowledge the input  
of loved ones, friends, acquaintances, business thinkers,  
academics and everyone else who knows us, for their  
honesty, wit, wisdom and anecdotes that have made this a  
pleasure to compile.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Theo Theobald and Cary Cooper must be one of the oddest pairings in publishing. A Californian academic and media-darling and a streetwise Scouser with quick wit, a no-nonsense approach and a business network to die for.

Theo Theobald is a freelance writer and sometime business professional, with a career that includes BBC management and advertising copywriting. He now runs his own company, Shocktactic Limited, writing and lecturing on management, lifestyle and human interaction. He describes himself as tirelessly enthusiastic and endlessly optimistic and admits that this can be 'a bit irritating'.

Cary Cooper, CBE, is Professor of Organizational Psychology and Health at Lancaster University Management School, and Pro Vice Chancellor of Lancaster University. He is President of the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy, former President of the British Academy of Management, a Patron of the National Phobic Society and an Ambassador of The Samaritans. He is the author of numerous books and scholarly articles. He was awarded the CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours List in 2001 for his contribution to organizational health.

# INTRODUCTION

This isn't a self-help book and here's why: self-help is for people with time on their hands, time to stop and consider what their faults are and how wonderful the future will be when they've finished reading the latest 'book of promises'.

Most of us don't have that time, so we've written this book to save you doing all the work that most self-help relies on; it's more like 'we-help'. We've drawn on the experience of business leaders and academics; more important than that, we've spoken to proper workers, the people who do the jobs that keep our organizations running and, based on their issues and experiences, we've constructed a 10-day detox programme, so that you don't have to. All you need to do is follow the actions we've devised on a daily basis and you'll find you will work more efficiently. The inevitable (and desirable) consequence of this is that you will find some time for yourself again, time to do things you want, which we'd guess isn't reading 'self-help'.

The added difficulty with most other programmes is that they're a lot like horoscopes. Some people believe religiously in them; others treat them with scepticism; and then there are those who claim to be disbelievers but sneak a look whenever they get the chance (it's also true that if they find something they don't like very much, they pretend it doesn't apply to them!).

The success of *Detox your Desk* isn't defined by the *level of trust* you put in it; it's a set of factual statements and practical actions that work. There is no clever interpretation or spin, no smoke and mirrors or bottled snake-oil, just common sense.

Most other books will tell you that your unfulfilled potential is limitless, that you can become President, or fly to the moon, if you'd just *believe*. You might be lulled into a state of misery about the huge gulf between where you are now and where any self-respecting citizen of the workplace should rightly aspire to be. But, for most of us, this just isn't true, the gulf doesn't exist; usually our dreams are *just* out of reach: 'if only we had a bit more money, more time, more influence, more love ...'

*Detox your Desk* doesn't made huge promises; it's just a way of getting more out of your working day, increasing your productivity, maximizing your efficiency and allowing you to go home on time.

That's all, but for most of us, that's enough.

What we say is that the things which drag most of us down, sap our energy day after day and stop us reaching our potential are nothing more than minor dissatisfactions, not huge crisis issues.

It's not that we're *actively* unhappy; we're just *passively* pissed off.

The sources of mild modern misery are usually fairly few and most of us share the same ones. You'd have thought we would have found an answer to them by now, but just like the 'common cold', the cure is more elusive than we'd like.

What is it that detoxing your desk could do which you might not have found anywhere else? There are three key elements that drive the success of the programme: firstly, the idea of operating in a tidy, strictly ordered, zero tolerance workspace is part of the answer - detox is also about a philosophy. Our desk or workspace is symbolic of our lives as a whole. The way we choose to operate during the time-consuming and important portion of our lives called 'work' sets the tone for how we are as people, so it's up to us to make the right choices.

Secondly, there's a recognition that while everyone is different, our ability to sort our desks (and lives) out is equal: all we need is the motivation and the tools. If you claim that you're 'not a naturally tidy person', it doesn't matter, because detox isn't about personality, it's about *procedure*.

If you were unfortunate enough to need heart by-pass surgery, you'd hope that the surgeon had good people skills, allied to a bedside manner that was reassuring, but more important to you than their personality is their ability to stick to the procedure. How would we feel if they suddenly decided to get all creative and 'blue-sky thinking' halfway through our op? 'I tell you what nurse, this time, just to see

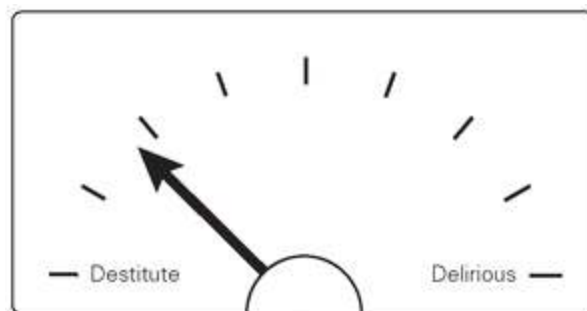


what happens, why don't we try attaching the tube for the left ventricle into the hole for the aorta?' No thanks.

'Procedure' is about doing the same things the same way, every time you do them, *every single time* you do them; something which is not only heartening if you're under the surgeon's knife (no pun intended), but also when it comes to detoxing. So, you needn't feel that the process you're about to undergo will turn you into some kind of tidying-up robot; your personality is still free to exercise itself in whatever eccentric ways you choose. It's just that now you'll be able to do it in a well organized environment, with more time on your hands.

The third important element is that of 'inter-connectivity', the blindingly obvious fact that everything we do has an impact on everything else. You can prove this to yourself by making up your own 'why test', which starts with a general rating of dissatisfaction.

Mentally move the arrow to the position that best sums up your level of satisfaction at work



If you're even mildly dissatisfied, think about why, then connect your answers together. It might look something

similar to this:

*I'm dissatisfied at work.*

*Why?*

*Reason 1: Because I have no energy any more.*

*Why?*

*Reason 2: Because I'm constantly stressed.*

*Why?*

*Reason 3: My stress is driven by guilt.*

*Why?*

*Reason 4: Because I never have enough time for the important things in my life.*

*Why?*

*Reason 5: Because I work long hours.*

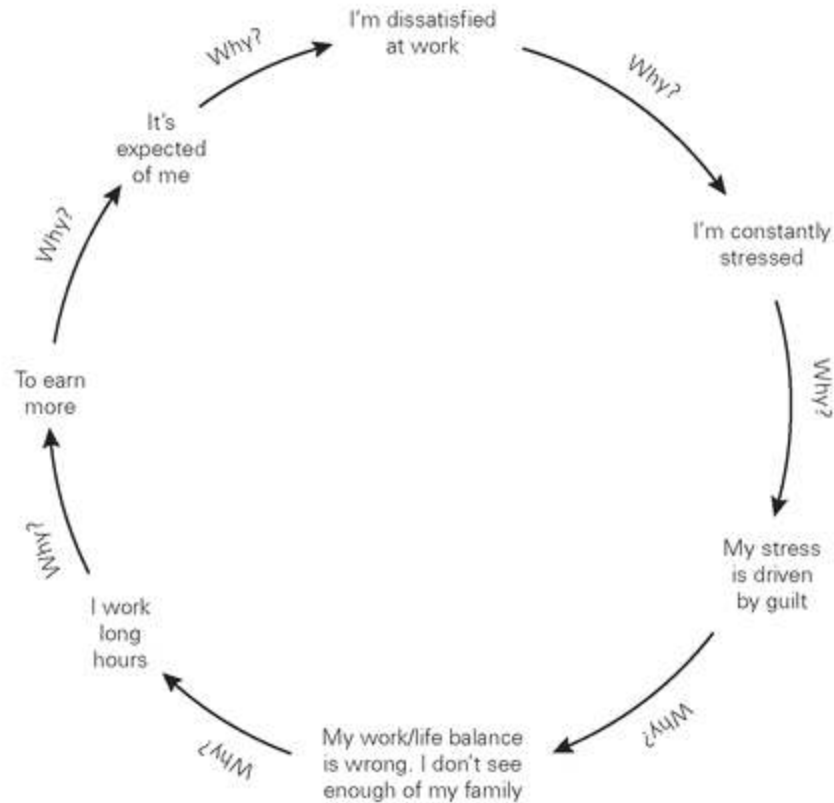
*Why?*

*Reason 6: Because I want to provide for my family.*

*Why?*

*Reason 7: Because that is my duty.*

The 'why test' works differently for each of us, but starting with any given dissatisfaction, you always end up with a loop, where one element is driven by another, which in turn is connected to one more, showing that unless we break the circle, we'll never be able to unravel the interconnections. That's part of the objective with this method.



It's worth saying here that the subtitle to this book, 'De-clutter your life and mind' is a critical element too. Having the chance to free up some valuable thinking time is a by-product of what you're about to embark on.

So, our desk detox is *symbolic*, it's *procedure-driven* and it's set in an environment of *inter-connectivity*. These are the three key principles of the programme.

Detoxing your desk, your timekeeping, your finances or anything else isn't about huge changes that, in a matter of weeks, will make you unrecognizable to your friends and family. It's much more to do with small, daily changes over a 10-day period, followed by ongoing 'farming' as a method for sustaining your progress. You only need to detox once

(though reminding yourself about it now and again will help), then with regular maintenance, you can keep yourself in that state for ever after.

Ten years ago, detoxing your body was all the rage, though like lots of self-improvement schemes, it was soon replaced by something new. It seemed that, like most programmes, it had a downside. You had to give *everything* up (except the things that no one likes), with the result that most people ended up in an irritable state, with blinding headaches.

This programme isn't nearly so extreme, unless you think that common sense is a bit edgy. None of the changes is difficult or dangerous; all of them can be maintained in the long term, and that combination is the basis of the programme's success.

There is a rule that's compulsory though, because even if the suggestions we make aren't difficult, they're not optional either. This is a 'zero tolerance' programme, so if you want to pick and choose which bits you buy into (like when you're reading the horoscopes), you might as well know right now, the method simply won't work and you'll be worse off than when you started. You'll feel that, yet again, you've attempted to change things and failed.

The promise is that this is a 'once-only' way of changing things; get it right first time and you won't need to keep on returning to the start to try again.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Just picking the book up and reading it would be fine; you'd soon get the hang of where it was going. But to make life easier and give you the chance to get the most out of your detox, here are a few notes of explanation.

There are three sections, the first is **'Analysis'**, and before you feel inclined to skip over it, this provides a really strong set of reasons for detox, all of which will help when you undertake the programme. It's more than just an interesting look back at the way we used to work and how organizations function now; the insight it provides is aimed at helping to increase your motivation levels, to enable you to be the best you can and as efficient as possible.

Having the motivation to detox is all very good, but without the right tools for the job, you'd flounder at the first hurdle, so *Section Two* of the book looks at **'Method'**. Here you'll find all the necessary support for your detox: it'll make you think about how to overcome the obstacles you'll meet, equip you for completing the tasks you'll be set and prepare you for success.

The bit that everyone wants to jump straight into is **'The detox programme'** itself in *Section Three* of the book. It's a 10-day map of actions, thoughts, reflections and behaviour that will change the way you work.

## THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR ...

Scattered liberally throughout the text there are sign-posts, memory joggers and introspective tasks to think about, each of which has its own icon, as follows:



### **Pause for thought**

You'll find lots of references to raising your level of consciousness, because this is one of the really important elements of change. Having time to stop and think is a great benefit, so when you see this icon, set a bit of time aside to pause and ponder.



### **Note to self**

Sometimes we all need to set reminders or just log important actions that need to be taken. A diary is the best place, but if you have your own separate system (maybe an electronic itinerary on your phone) then feel free to use that.

Each time you see the pencil icon (above) make the 'note to self' it specifies.



### **Do it now!**

Too often we put off the things which will make our lives easier. The paradox is that the effort we put into these actions usually turns out to be less than the energy we lose by *not* doing what's nagging at us. It saps our energy, so when we say do it now, we mean it!



### **Real life**

During the course of our research, we've come across many stories that support or enhance the theories we've put forward. You'll find these marked in the text by this icon and they give you a chance to reflect on what is happening, or has happened, to other people.



## **Quotation**

The text that follows is supported by the input of interesting business figures from organizations as diverse as IBM and the NHS. Over and above their wisdom, there are quotations from historical figures and heroes of our age, and these are marked out by the 'speech icon' shown above. Hopefully, their wisdom will help to supplement our thoughts; you can memorize any that really appeal to you and quote them at appropriate times!



## **Pertinent Post-its**

Have you ever got to the end of a chapter of a book and wondered what it was about? Not because you couldn't understand the content, but simply because your concentration wavered at the vital moment.

To act as a memory jogger, we've included the most relevant tips and bullet points from each of the chapters of this book on a 'Pertinent Post-it' which summarizes what



you've just read. These notes appear on all but the final section, which outlines the detox programme.

## **DEFINING THE PROBLEM OF TOXINS AND ADDICTIONS**

We're not like cavemen any more, fighting for survival against predatory beasts and the harsh elements; instead, because we pretty much have everything we could ever want and need, we've invented our own *virtual* sabre tooth tigers and sub-zero temperatures.

The dangers that face us, like stress, addiction and over-indulgence, are every bit as life-threatening, but, before you can hope to be free of them, you first of all have to admit their presence.

If you like 'the odd glass of wine' or you're carrying 'a few extra pounds' try scaring the hell out of yourself by finding out how bad the problem is. There are lots of websites on health and well being, so it's not hard to find an 'are you drinking too much?' quiz, or an 'optimum weight for your height' chart.

What works against most of us where this is concerned is when we fall into the trap of 'denial by comparison', which means that we think we're okay because we use other people as our benchmark, rather than proven medical fact. So, if you're 'not as fat as x' or you 'drink much less than y', the truth might be that you're still in the danger zone; it may be time to reassess yourself. This 'denial by comparison' is especially dangerous if you use the

contestants in reality television shows as a basis for judging your own misdeeds.

The same applies with detoxing your desk. Just thinking that you're 'a bit untidy but it could be worse' (worse, that is, if someone dumped the waste bins from the canteen over your desktop and left a dead rat in the top drawer), is not a realistic starting point. Your state of mind has to be about *admission* of the problem, because it's only then that you'll do something about it.

The reality of the situation is that only a small percentage of our society is dreadfully addicted, most of us are just mildly overindulgent; however it's not the *degree* to which we exercise our excesses, but the *regularity*. Stopping that is at the heart of successful detox. A little too much (alcohol or untidiness), over a long period of time, is the very factor that can leave us with permanent low level dissatisfaction.

So, the first stage of being able to detox is owning up. It's the ability to say to yourself that you don't like the way things are now and you're not going to live with them any longer.

Step two is just as simple: it involves making a deal with yourself. This, again, is where toxins and addictions share common ground. If you've ever found yourself in a situation where you've pledged to give up or cut down on something because you've been nagged into it, you'll know just how much you can come to resent whoever nagged you. It makes sense that our only real chance of success occurs when we're doing it for ourselves. Detox because you want

to, not because someone else says you should, and try to remember afterwards, when you're going around being evangelical about the process and what it's done for you, that not everyone may share your enthusiasm. They might still be in denial.



## **WHAT'S ON YOUR DESK?**

You might like, at this stage, to give yourself a benchmark against other people, not so you can pretend you're much better than the average, but so you get a feel for what needs to be done. In our research we asked people what was on their desks, and some of the responses are listed below. Think about how this compares to your own workspace.

- Computer monitor, keyboard and mouse
- Files and folders
- Stationery (pens, pencils, staplers, paperclips, desk-tidy, scissors, highlighters etc.)
- Trade magazines
- Research documents
- Reports
- Invoices
- Orders

All of this is the kind of thing you'd expect to find, it's the 'tools of the trade', but the key question to ask is, 'Why is it there?' With very few exceptions, the

things that surround us are dormant for most of the time: we mean to get round to reading reports, but never do; our intent with files and folders is that we action them, but the reality is we can only do one thing at a time. The harsh truth is that most things that surround us are only serving to confuse our thinking, to mess up our desks and clutter our minds. Often, we keep things only for reasons of *heritage* or *habit*, i.e. because they've always been there, or we've got into the bad practice of holding on to stuff that's not needed. Everything that's on your desk that isn't being used is a toxin which is distracting you from the job in hand. (Please note that the real definition of multi-tasking is doing more than one thing at a time ... badly!)



'To do two things at once is to do neither.'  
Publilius Syrus (Latin writer of maxims)

If you now think that there are some items in the above list that could be binned or put away elsewhere, you've made a good start, but there is worse to come. The next list incorporates some of the totally useless things that people hoard. We haven't made them up, people actually admitted to their presence.

- The last person's work (i.e. the files and folders that belonged to the person who 'used to sit here')
- Postcards (from last year)
- Cuddly toys (donated by loving partners or children)
- Instructions for the photocopier (that was replaced by a newer model four years ago, yes that's right, four years ago)
- Stress toys (now coated with dust)
- A broken hole punch
- Novelty paperweight
- Several blobs of Blu-Tack

There were more, but we've listed enough for you to start to see the picture. Sometimes people hang onto things for some kind of misguided sentimental reasons; what use are the postcards once you've read them, other than to remind you that someone else had a better holiday than you? How likely is it that the photocopier will one day come back and, if it did, would you need the instructions to know how to work it? In all of these cases we returned to the same question, we asked people, 'Why, what are these things doing on your desk; what purpose do they serve?'

Now think about your desk, list all the things on it and ask yourself why they're there; if there's no good reason, it's time to detox.

## **SETTING YOUR PERSPECTIVE**

The differences between us are remarkable: no two matching sets of fingerprints or DNA or, for that matter, no two personalities that are identical. This means that we can both look at the same thing and come up with different interpretations of its form, or its ethos, or its implications. There will be an opportunity to assess your personal attitude to detox a little later, but be aware that outsiders might see the process, with its zero tolerance approach, as restrictive, retentive, even excessive; that, of course, is their prerogative and it's based on their perspective.

Our preferred way of looking at detox is that it is a 'design for life', and here's an explanation why. The concept of design is subjective: what one person thinks looks wonderful, the next might be appalled by. However, something that combines function and form with efficiency and aesthetics (i.e. it looks good and it works well), tends to get most people's vote. Here's an example:

## **The benefit of good design**

Ever since grapes were first trodden and wine first made (which is probably quite a long time ago), man and, increasingly, woman too, has faced the tricky task of uncorking the bottle. If, as a teenager, you ever attended a party of such sophistication that someone had brought a bottle of warm Liebfraumilch, you'll know how frustrating it can be to be deprived of the contents, all for the want of an opener. Probably, three essential items were gathered together, a fork, a tin of Elastoplast and the telephone number of the nearest Accident and Emergency department.