

How Do You Eat an Elephant?

by Helen Kornblum

A friend and I were reminiscing about the stages of joke telling that our children went through, beginning with knock-knock jokes. She reminded me of the popularity of elephant jokes. The only one I remembered was “How do you know if an elephant has been in your refrigerator?” My friend’s contribution was “How do you eat an elephant?” The answer to that question is “One bite at a time.” The answer is a great analogy for organizing large projects.

Are there elephants in your life right now? As we drift toward September, most of us ease out of vacation mode, contemplating the work or commitments we’ll be facing. Children go off to school, deadlines become more prominent on our calendars, and some of us wonder how we’ll get through the holidays because we already see a time squeeze in our lives.

Your first step is to identify the elephants that are lining up in the pages of your planner. Categorize them and select the one you want to work on first. It might be a special report for the boss or a marketing campaign for your home business. It could also be a longstanding project around the house. Prioritizing will help you keep your focus on a few goals and prevent you from scattering your efforts. Once your elephants are lined up, you can move them along in an orderly way by planning where you will take the first bite.

1. Break each project down into its logical stages. What must you do first to get things moving? Identifying the smaller goals for each stage gives you a realistic sequence of activities that will be manageable.
2. Assign deadline dates to each phase of the project and put them into your planner. You might want to make a separate project chart. Having that roadmap will tell you what you need to work on next to move things along.
3. Periodically evaluate how you’re proceeding. Your first analysis of the logical stages may need to be revised. A research phase for a report may take longer than you anticipated. Getting supplies for a home project may slow you down. Non-critical deadlines can be changed if circumstances change.

Can you handle more than one elephant at a time? Most of us do. And most of us meet our deadlines. Using the one bite approach helps us eliminate the stress of juggling too many tasks at once. By being more deliberate in planning, we have a sense of control about how and when we’ll reach our goals. By being aware of our progress, we encourage ourselves. And by turning out good quality work, we lose our fear of the new elephants that lumber into our lives.

Are you waiting for the answer to the joke in the first paragraph? You can tell that an elephant has been in your refrigerator because there are footprints in the butter!

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