

Focus. Sprint. Recover.

A 3-Step Model

Victoria Tucker | ZBglobal-Geniopath | July 2024



How to Thrive While Juggling Elephants,
Flaming Tiki Torches and Shards of Glass

Introduction

As a large group of mid-level managers gathered for an in-person workshop I was facilitating on *Focus. Sprint. Recover.*, Rachael* pulled me aside. She began sharing her current situation which included the following:

She had just returned from maternity leave after giving birth to twins.

She had been promoted to a role with increased responsibilities.

And, to top it all off, she and her husband had embarked on a complete home remodel.

With tears in her eyes, Rachael asked, *“Is it possible I’m overwhelmed?”*

There’s no denying that life today requires the ability to juggle a multitude of roles and responsibilities—

many of which feel like dancing with flaming torches, walking on glass shards, and herding elephants of various sizes. Still, it is possible to not just survive, but thrive.

Focus. Sprint. Recover. is a three-step model guiding you to clarify objectives, identify smarter ways to *get things done*, and by making well-being an indispensable part of your daily routine.

By focusing on seasonal goals, sprinting through key endeavors, and embracing recovery as essential for peak performance, it is entirely possible to transform both your professional and personal life for greater success and joy.

**Name changed to respect privacy.*



NARROW YOUR SCOPE

Achieve goals by emphasizing the importance of planning and prioritization over a defined period like a business quarter which, interestingly, is the same as one of nature's seasons.

The first step is to firmly grab hold of the *big picture*—important objectives and major events expected during that timeframe—before you do any deep diving into the minutiae of daily tasks.

Strategic Quarterly Mapping

At the start of each quarter (season), set aside time to identify specific and aspirational targets for work, family, and health. With these, include associated events that will shape your calendar.

Strategic mapping goes beyond work-related tasks (like project deadlines and high-priority meetings) to also integrate personal commitments. Family celebrations, scheduling training to

upskill or going after long-held ambitions (like traveling to a foreign country) are also priorities worthy of focus. By pausing a moment, or two, to gain a high-level perspective, you are taking a mental snapshot on what needs to be achieved and by when.

Monthly, Weekly, and Daily Breakdowns

Once the quarter is considered, break it down as needed - monthly, weekly, or daily. The key is to start with your most important goals to avoid getting side-tracked with lesser activities that can easily consume all time and energy.

Revisit your quarterly plan each month to adjust and refine based on progress made and any new factors that may require your attention. This ongoing assessment ensures you remain aligned with your initial goals while allowing flexibility to adapt to changes or unexpected events.

Incorporate Personal and Social Commitments

To reiterate, inserting events into your schedule ahead of time such as family vacations, children's sporting activities, hobbies and activities that support your

personal well-being are vital. Far from "*If only I could...*" events, they are crucial to maintaining strong relationships and in sustaining a healthy cadence of activity.

As much as possible, safeguard these events and avoid negative self-talk that "*Work must always come first,*" or that "*Others need me so I guess I won't sign up for that painting class I've already put off twice to take.*" Besides, telling Oliver, your 7-year old, that you need to celebrate his birthday on a different day is probably *not* the memory you want to leave him with.

PRIORITIZE THE PRIORITIES

As you imagine what lies ahead in the season, consider how to *prioritize the priorities*. With a comprehensive view of the upcoming season, you can better organize tasks and commitments by assessing their impact and importance.

This might mean deciding which projects require more resources and attention, and which personal commitments are non-negotiable. The aim is to strike momentum in your professional and personal life in a way that optimizes overall satisfaction and effectiveness.

As the late time management guru Stephen Covey said, “*First things first.*” His often referred to Priority Matrix categorizes tasks into four quadrants: *urgent and important, not urgent but important, urgent but not important, and neither urgent nor important.*

To bolster your focus, identify those things that you *Must Do Immediately* (Urgent and Important) as in “*My daughter just broke her ankle, so we need to go to the hospital!*” Or “*Our CEO needs a risk assessment report by 9am tomorrow for an emergency investor meeting convening at noon.*”

Next, focus on tasks that are important but not necessarily urgent (*Plan and Schedule*). This is where activities aimed at innovation and growth take center stage. Developing your professional skills or proactively creating a more efficient operational process to reduce unnecessary work fit with this category.

PRIORITY MATRIX



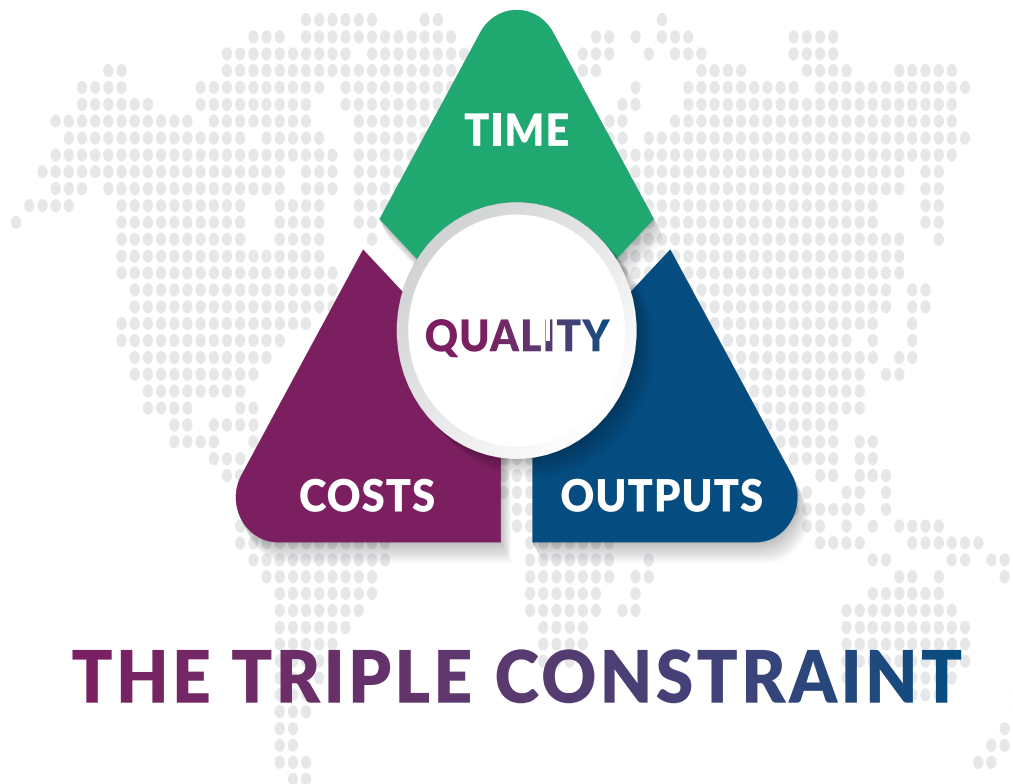
Use the Priority Matrix to carve out more room for what is important. Taking the initiative to be proactive (versus settling into a default mindset of being *reactive*) will help you avoid the great time-suck of those tasks represented in the other quadrants.

When something is *not urgent or important* for you to **address**, consider delegating it or ignoring it altogether.

USE THE TRIPLE CONSTRAINT MODEL

The renowned Project Management Institute (PMI) often refers to the *Triple Constraint Model* as an essential concept in balancing and managing trade-offs

among three critical elements: time, cost, and scope (output). These factors are so interdependent that a change in one almost always impacts the others.



THE TRIPLE CONSTRAINT

You can achieve one or two of the factors while maintaining quality, but rarely all three.
Calculate the trade-offs you are willing to make.

This model goes beyond being a framework to guide project managers in making informed decisions where the need to align

objectives and manage resources is great. It is also an effective tool for anyone keen on generating better focus. Are there trade-offs you need to make?

Know the Constraints

1. **Time (Schedule):** The duration available to complete the project or, on a personal level – make an important decision. Changing the schedule can mean either accelerating or delaying the project's completion or the implementation of that significant decision.
2. **Cost (Resources):** This includes all types of resources like budget, people, equipment, and even your own abilities and energy. Managing costs effectively is crucial, especially when budget (or personal energy) constraints are tight.
3. **Scope (Output):** The tangible deliverables of a project. Or, if personal, the specific achievement desired. Changing the scope might involve either scaling down deliverables or changing specific features like adding a cupholder to your newly invented bicycle or deciding your anniversary party does not need to be held at the Taj Mahal.

How to Apply the Model

Projects

If, for example, a key team member leaves the project, the immediate effects touch upon all three constraints. The expertise lost with the team member impacts the scope (output) directly; without their skills, the quality or completeness of the deliverable might suffer.

The cost may increase if additional or more skilled resources are required to fill the gap.

The schedule might need adjustment—either a delay until a suitable replacement is found or an extension to accommodate the learning curve of a newly onboarded member.

Envisioning the trade-offs needed can result in more informed conversations with project stakeholders.

Personal

If, for example, you are considering a significant purchase like an electric vehicle, the same principles apply.



If quality is non-negotiable, the cost of the car becomes the primary flexible constraint. Waiting for market conditions to improve (delaying the time to buy) is a trade-off that can be made. Alternatively, adjusting the scope by opting for fewer or different features can also align the vehicle cost to fit within the limits of your budget.

Get Better at Making Strategic Trade-offs

Understanding and applying the Triple Constraint Model can position you to make strategic choices that better sync with your focused objectives.

When you are reallocating resources, extending timelines, or modifying project deliverables, keep in mind that each decision likely involves a calculated trade-off.

As you explore, and weigh, your trade-off options, select the course of action that gets you closest to achieving your desired state without sacrificing quality.

Whether the endeavor is work-related or more personal, use the Triple Constraint Model to help fine-tune your focus.



SHIFT YOUR PLAN INTO HIGH GEAR

Reinforce your strategic thinking by translating key activities into a visual for easier referencing and tracking. This approach is grounded in the premise that keeping an eye (literally) on your planning facilitates the achievement of objectives including those related to your overall state of being.

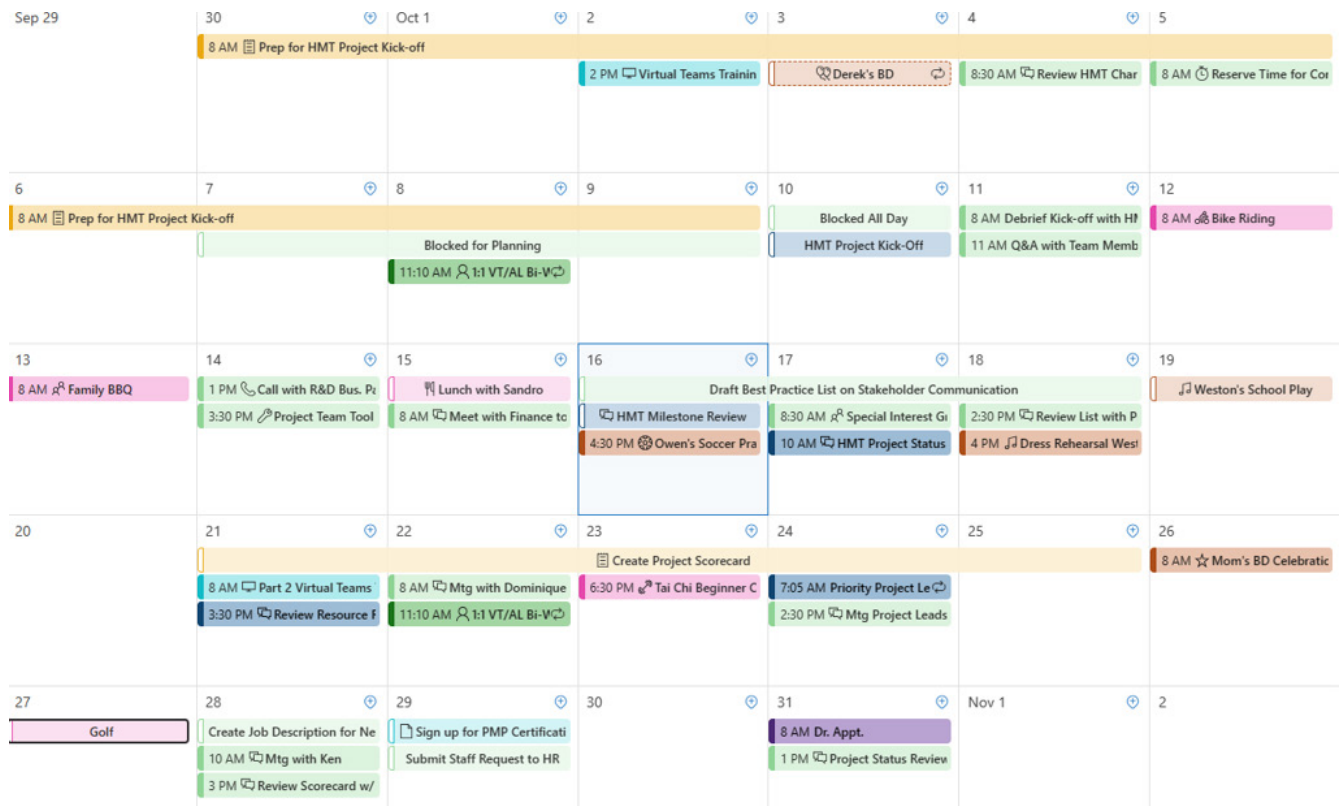
Turn Big Picture Thinking into a Visual

When you mull over your goals on a broader scale (like monthly or quarterly), you go beyond the boundaries of daily-to-do lists by

elevating more important activities to be at the forefront. One way to shift into *sprint mode* is by using a month-at-a-glance software calendar to visually represent your commitments and deadlines. This offers a holistic view to mentally alert you to (as much as possible) align your overarching goals with daily tasks.

The illustration on the following page offers an example of how visual cues (color-coded) can act as prompts to quickly assess if you are moving at a reasonable pace throughout the month.

STEP 2: SPRINT (continued)



Pre-populate Key Activities

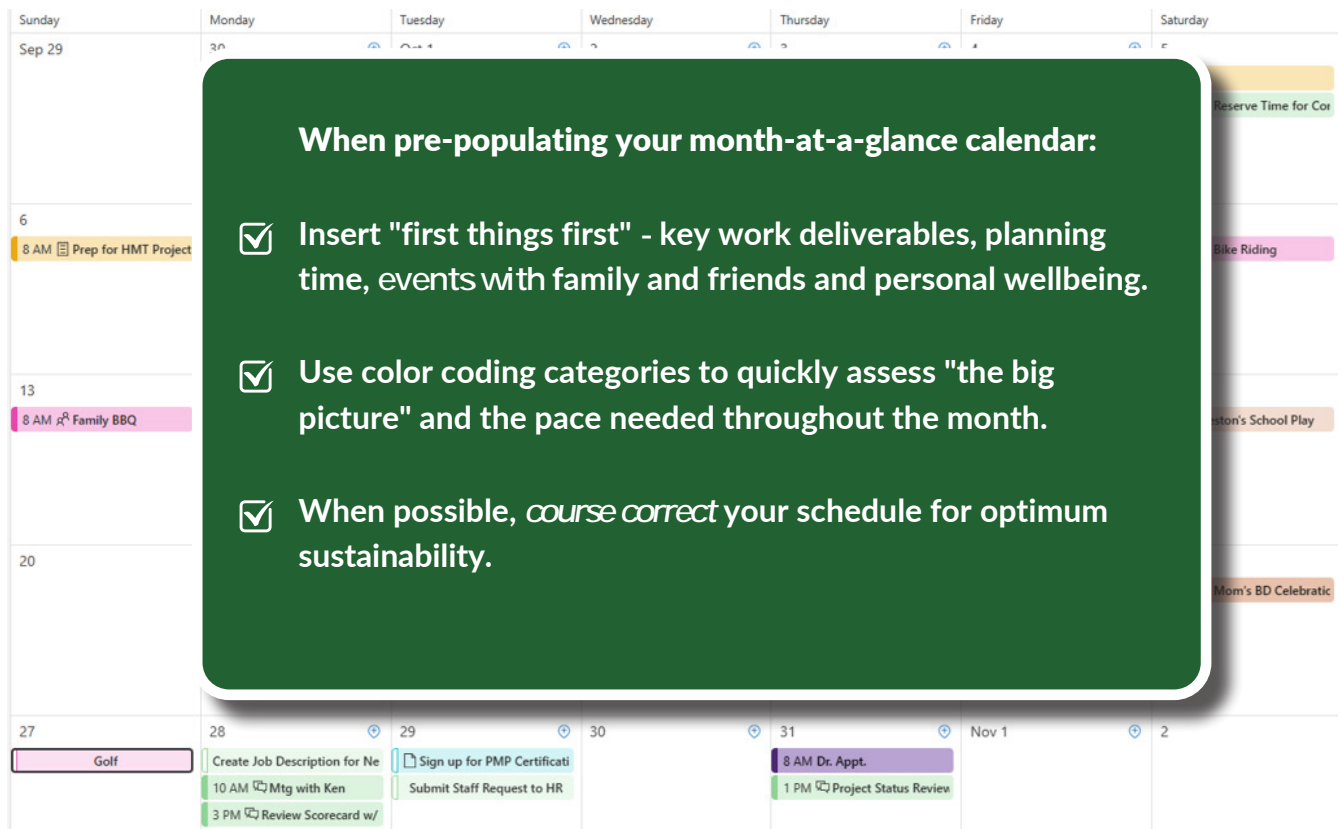
Use the color-coding features of your online calendar *after* you have plugged in crucial work, family, and health events for the time period. These become foundational dates with subsequent events and activities built around them.

By entering key dates ahead of time, you are placing them front and center in your schedule. Remember Covey's words, "*First things first.*"

Book End Your Deliverables

For each major task or event, schedule preliminary planning and preparation time as well as post-completion downtime.

This technique, known as *bookending*, ensures that you have a buffer for unexpected contingencies before the event and a decent amount of opportunity to recuperate afterwards. It's an approach that optimizes performance and recovery.



Personal Energy Cycle

When orchestrating significant events, such as launching a major project or doing a complete renovation overhaul to your house, consider the schedule to sync with your personal energy cycles. For example, building a backyard fence on Saturday might not be ideal if you launched a demanding work project the day before.

Likewise, volunteering to do aggressive fundraising for your daughter's girl scout troop (as you simultaneously coordinate a dozen contractors at your home on that house renovation) might not be pleasant.

No one is suggesting you can't tackle several hard things all at once. The better question to ask is "How can I organize these events to maintain an optimum (and healthy) pace?"

Avoid burnout by knowing when your internal resources will likely be consumed by key endeavors so you can plan accordingly. This includes making time on the back end to *reset* before taking on something new.

Read more about *pacing* on the next pages.

Pace Like an Athlete

Adopt the mindset of an athlete, who understands the importance of pacing. The analogy of sprinting is apt for work projects as well: a constant high-speed approach can lead to exhaustion, whereas moving too-slowly might prevent achieving your goals in a timely fashion. Find a sustainable working rhythm that allows for intervals of highly focused effort followed by periods of rest. This type of pacing ensures optimum productivity without compromising health or quality of life.

CHECK YOUR VITALS

When sprinting through key events to reach those big goals, pay attention to your energy vitals. This concept involves being mindful of those fundamentals essential to healthier living - breathing, eating, and sleeping, each of which plays a pivotal role in sustaining energy and focus.

Need a refresher? Read on.

Breathing. Conscious breathing exercises can rapidly decrease stress and increase mental clarity. Techniques like deep diaphragmatic breathing assists in calming the nervous system and revitalizing the mind which is essential for high performance during intense periods of activity.

Eating. Nutritional choices directly impact energy levels and cognitive function. Consuming a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, proteins, and whole grains provides the sustained energy needed for enduring long stretches of demanding work. Avoiding spikes in blood sugar by steering clear of excessive sweets and processed foods can also keep your energy levels stable.

Sleeping. Quality sleep is perhaps the most critical (but often neglected) element of maintaining a healthy pace. Adequate sleep rejuvenates the body, consolidates memories, and repairs muscles, all vital for optimal functioning. Establishing a consistent sleep schedule and creating a restful environment free from disruptions (like electronic devices) can appreciably improve sleep quality.

Integrating mindfulness into these aspects of health not only influences immediate performance but also contributes to long-term success.

By regularly pausing to assess and adjust your breathing, eating, and sleeping habits, you can make sure that your body and mind are primed to excel given the challenges and goals facing you. This practice not only enhances productivity but also fosters a more balanced and fulfilling life.

NOT EVERYTHING REQUIRES 100% EFFORT

Take back control over your productivity by understanding that not everything requires 100% effort. This is particularly applicable when juggling a wide variety of roles and responsibilities.

As you prioritize tasks—starting with the most crucial—evaluate the level of effort and attention each one *truly* requires. It's quite likely that some activities will yield satisfactory results with somewhere between 70% and 85% of expended effort. This can free you up for tasks demanding fuller engagement.

Determining what requires 100% effort depends significantly on the nature of the work and the standards of the industry. For example, in manufacturing, precision may be paramount. There are certainly some cases where meticulous attention to detail is required like achieving Six Sigma in medical device production.

However, in many other fields, the concept of 100% can be more fluid, often defined by personal or organizational

standards rather than strict industry requirements. In knowledge-based or creative professions, perfection might be a moving target, influenced by subjective interpretation rather than objective criteria. In this case, what constitutes 100% effort can vary greatly, often depending on individual or team perceptions of what is necessary to meet or exceed expectations.

Learn to be more efficient with your time and resources by distinguishing between tasks that require absolute flawlessness (for all you perfectionists out there) and the many tasks that simply do not. In doing so, you adopt a strategic approach to work where effort is matched to the expected impact of the task.

This mindset can prompt greater productivity at the same threshold as striving for a healthier work-life balance.

Prevent burnout by avoiding unnecessary overexertion on tasks that simply will not benefit from it.



CONSIDER CAPACITY

A finite number of hours are available to us each day. With physical and mental energy levels fluctuating throughout, each of us is constantly reminded about the true (albeit annoying) fact that as humans, we have real limitations.

The first step in managing capacity effectively is to realistically assess capabilities and time. Understanding that it is impossible to accomplish everything allows for more strategic decision-making about where to allocate effort and when it is beneficial to decline additional responsibilities.

Learning to say "no" or "not now" becomes a critical skill in this context. These words are a legitimate tool in managing workload and avoiding overcommitment which can lead to stress, burnout, and decreased productivity.

Likewise, respecting personal limitations also involves recognizing when certain tasks exceed one's skill set or when you're just not in the right mental state to perform effectively. This awareness can guide decisions about delegating tasks, or simply scheduling work for a more opportune time. It is possible to safeguard your health and wellbeing while also ensuring the work gets done and at a quality level.



BUILD IN MICROBREAKS

Incorporating *microbreaks* into the workday is **another** powerful strategy for maintaining and enhancing productivity. These short, deliberate pauses—lasting just 5, 10, or 15 minutes—serve as revitalizing intervals to quickly reset the mind and body. By stepping away from the workspace to engage in different activities, you can significantly boost your brain power and physical energy.

The benefits of microbreaks are many. Physically, they help to alleviate the strain on the body caused by prolonged periods of sitting or standing in one position. Activities such as stretching or walking increase blood flow, reduce muscle tension, and can prevent the discomfort and long-term damage associated with sedentary work habits.

Psychologically, these breaks can reduce stress, prevent cognitive overload, and improve overall mood. Even brief diversions from a task can refresh the brain, leading to increased concentration and renewed focus upon return to work.

Additionally, stepping outside to engage in a light, enjoyable activity can provide a change of scenery which stimulates creativity. Natural environments have been shown to enhance mental cognition and foster relaxation. Re-energizing in a broader, more natural setting can provide new perspectives and invigorate your approach to work.

Microbreaks also support the concept of sustainable *work sprints*, where high-intensity focus is balanced with sufficient recovery time. This rhythm aligns more closely with the human body's natural energy cycles (ultradian rhythms) which suggest that the optimal period of focused work time is followed by a necessary recovery phase—perfectly suited for a microbreak.

To implement microbreaks, adopt the practice of scheduling breaks in your calendar as non-negotiable appointments, using reminders or apps that signal when it's time to take them. Think of this like a sport coach calling you away from intense playing so you can recharge before **getting** back in the game.

CALENDAR TIME FOR WELLBEING AND JOY

Taking care of yourself requires proactive effort. No one is going to grant you permission. It is up to you to regularly schedule moments to reset and re-energize as the path to enhanced personal satisfaction and better overall mental and physical health.

Incorporate *macrobreaks* into your routine by intentionally pre-scheduling and protecting recovery dates after major work endeavors or life events. Once this becomes a habit, the cadence you create will benefit you in the months, and years ahead.

This strategy emphasizes the importance of balancing work with joy and relaxation. For example, on the heels of completing a large project (or a period of intense work), plan an outing like lunch with friends, fishing, painting a landscape, experimenting with new recipes, or engaging in any activity boosts your mental and emotional well-being.

These macro-breaks are more than just a respite from work. They are critical components in creating the meaningful lifestyle you envision.

By scheduling priority activities in advance and treating them as immovable appointments, you can avoid the common pitfall of sidelining personal time due to work demands or other responsibilities. This practice establishes boundaries that protect your time for self-care and joy, reinforcing the concept that personal well-being is as crucial as professional achievements.

Moreover, these scheduled breaks are vital for maintaining long-term motivation by providing something to look forward to. Knowing you will go on that long-awaited hike in the mountains, take a trip to the spa with your best friend, or attend a concert of that band you've been dying to see can be especially motivating during challenging or monotonous periods.

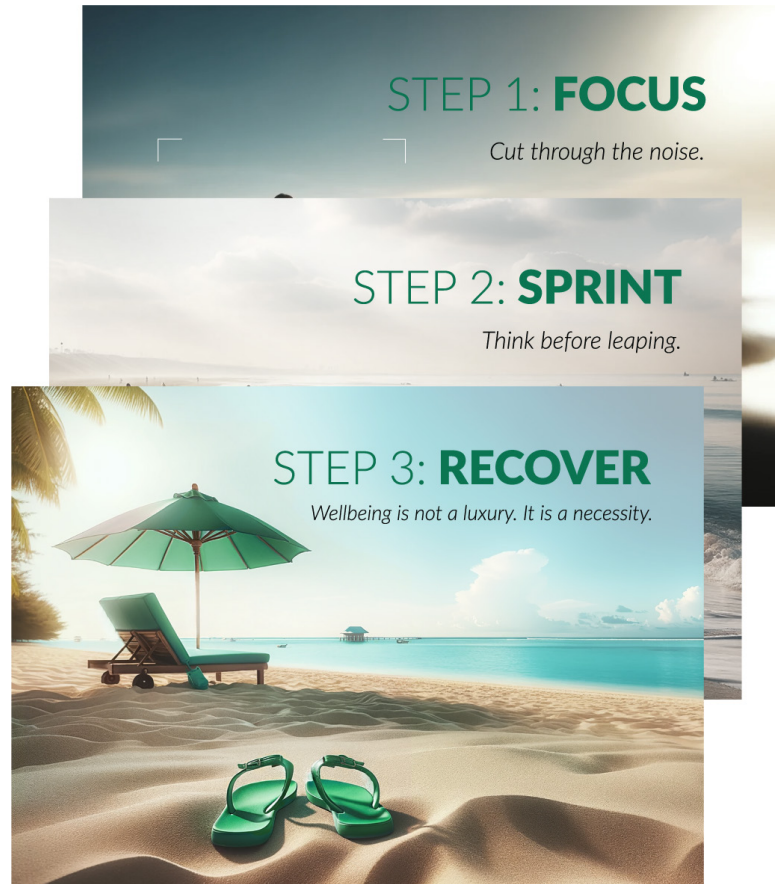
Having a definitive, planned break on the horizon can make intense workloads more manageable and encourage sustained effort in the short term.

Summing It Up

"Focus. Sprint. Recover." is a strategic approach to managing multiple roles and responsibilities effectively. This three-step model encourages you to clarify your goals, identify efficient ways to achieve tasks, and integrate well-being into your daily routine.

This overview sets out the importance of setting quarterly goals, breaking them down into monthly, weekly, and daily tasks, and ensuring personal and social commitments are included. The model also emphasizes the importance of prioritizing the priorities, understanding, and managing the triple constraint of time, cost, and scope, and maintaining a balanced pace by incorporating breaks and recovery periods throughout.

Using a structured (yet flexible) approach helps you optimize productivity and personal satisfaction, enabling you to thrive even when you feel like you are juggling elephants, flaming tiki torches and shards of glass.



About the Author

Victoria Tucker is a master builder of organizational communities where collaboration is amplified, knowledge is shared, and leaders are shaped by reimagining how work gets done in an age of global change. 25+ years of experience. 30,000+ professionals. 100+ organizations.

vtucker@zbglobal.com