

Secrets
to **Getting**
More Done
in Less
Time

Donna Otto



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The Common Begin, the Uncommon Finish



There was a problem worrying the female population of Phoenix, Arizona. I mean, there had to be. I was asked to teach a three-evening workshop at a local college on “Home Management for Housewives.” I had been assigned a seminar room capable of holding 15 people comfortably, but more than 275 women showed up to attend the first session. The college officials were overwhelmed. They transferred us to the campus auditorium. As we walked to the auditorium, I studied the faces of the women in the crowd.

You might have been among them; if not literally, then in kind. They ranged in age from 17 to 81. Some were well-dressed; others were making do. A few were smiling, but most were tired and weary looking. They had problems.

“...and she’s supposed to be good,” I overheard one woman say. “She’ll have to be to keep me awake after the day I put in. All three of my boys had ball games scheduled for...”

I lost the rest of the conversation as we entered the auditorium. Mrs. Graham, the campus director for evening studies, met me at the door.

“Oh, Mrs. Otto,” she said. “I...I had no idea there would be so many. I’m so terribly sorry.” Her hands were actually trembling.

I smiled. "They'll probably give you a raise, Mrs. Graham. This is a wonderful turnout. Really."

She began to twist a handkerchief in her hands. "Well, I... I never meant it to get so out of hand. It's just that when the Women's Club canceled its monthly meeting tonight so that its members could come here and..."

"It's okay, it's okay," I cut in. "No problem. You can do me one favor though. Here are the keys to my car. Please have someone open my trunk and bring the two full boxes of handout materials here."

Mrs. Graham's mouth fell open. "You mean to say that you came with enough handouts for everyone? *Everyone?*"

"This isn't the only seminar I'm scheduled for this week," I laughed. "My trunk is filled. We're going to be just fine tonight."

"Yes, yes, I can see that now," said Mrs. Graham, calm finally coming into her voice. "Thank goodness you practice what you preach. If I had been prepared the way you always are, this wouldn't have..."

I patted her shoulder. "Just get the handouts, Mrs. Graham. Things will be fine. I'll get started."

As I made my way to the podium, I again caught snatches of conversations:

"...just help me control my laundry, I'll be happy..."

"...so Tom hasn't had work for six months, and I'm on third shift..."

"...could just make two of myself, then I'd be able to..."

"...said she was from Chicago and moved out here more than 25 years ago."

I stood before the large gathering and waited for the room to get perfectly quiet. I held back a few seconds in order to rivet everyone's attention on me. Then I began.

"My name is Donna Otto, and I've lived where you live." I paused, then added, "Now, I want you to be able to live where I live."

The room remained silent.

"I came from a broken home. That was a life I didn't want for myself,

or my children, so I vowed to try to be the best wife possible. I've kept that vow."

I waited a moment, then continued.

"I was a single career woman who paid her own way by working at a boutique, directing a private school, selling real estate, and managing properties. The only real college training I ever received were the lessons I gained from the School of Hard Knocks. But I learned well. Today, I am an author, lecturer, and consultant in life management.

"I've lived where you live. I know the burdens, the problems, and the heartaches of living there.

"But I've moved away from that. I'll never move back. And tonight I want to begin showing you how I made that move.

"Then you can move too. Here, now, is my story...."



My parents married very young, and I was the firstborn. My mother's family was from Persia. Mother was cool, protective, and a taskmaster. My father was Italian—passionate, energetic, and very protective—especially of his daughter, whom he considered beautiful despite a nose that did justice to my Persian-Italian heritage. Once when a teenage boy said I looked like a cross between Pinocchio and Jimmy Durante, my father, who happened to overhear the taunt, asked, "Are your hospitalization benefits current?" That ended further teasing!

My dad restored my self-esteem during those moments, but he was too strict and kept me at arm's length from the warmth I really needed. After a stormy marriage, my parents divorced when I was 12.

My mother, my brother, and I moved from our large frame house to a one-bedroom apartment and started over from scratch. Mother went to work full-time in a candy factory, and I was left with a list of household chores and rules of housekeeping. (A daily job, for example, was to wash

the top of the refrigerator.) I had to clean and cook by myself on weekdays and assist my mother's vigorous attacks on the tough dirt on weekends. I was taught responsibility and duty under my mother's reinterpretation of the old cliché "Cleanliness is next to godliness," which was "Godliness is next to cleanliness."

A tough taskmaster can make a terrific teacher. Even though I didn't enjoy the discipline, boy, did I learn!

As a married woman and mother, I have discovered that organization, love, and hospitality are the time-tested attributes that husbands and children respect most about wives and mothers. Many women have no understanding of how to lead an organized life. After all, we learn good or



bad habits from our moms. We don't take Home Organization 101 in college. What I learned from a mother who by necessity *and* choice was organized has led me into a career as a teacher and advisor on life management for women.

Husbands have called me and made comments such as:

"For eight years I've said to my wife, 'You should get up early enough to have breakfast ready. You should set the table the night before. You should schedule daily activities.' She ignored everything I said. Then you spent three hours with her, and she's begun to do all these things. I don't know why, and really, I don't *care* why. I'm just grateful."

I've had women say, "After your classes, I wanted to organize my love, as you suggested, before I organized my home. But I listened to your word of caution: 'Home organization must come first.' I got my house in order.

"My husband says this is the most genuine act of love I could have ever shown him. Learning to be organized is not an act of selfishness, it's a discipline of love."

Early Influences

At every stage of my life, my father honestly believed I was Miss America. But I was an ugly duckling. I was too skinny, too tall, and had hair that was too thick and too bushy. I was the brunt of every nose joke ever created, like “Are you growing another arm in the middle of your face, Donna?”

But, as usually happens as we are growing up, we find one area of life that distinguishes us from everyone else. It may be our appearance, our athletic skills, our musical skills, our leadership skills, or some other talent that earns us a pat on the back from friends, teachers, relatives, and bosses. The awkward, skinny Donna Centanne found that her status symbol came from being “Miss Organized.”

When I started high school, I bought a small spiral notebook, to which I attached tabs. I had a little section in one of my desk drawers that had files, also with tabs, to keep my papers organized. At first my classmates teased me about being so organized about everything.

“What else do you put in there besides your homework assignments?” the kids would ask as they pointed to the black notebook. “You don’t have that great a social life. What are you doing?”

Some hotshot would then quip, “You training to be a spy or something?” And another would add, “What a bookworm!”

Their voices changed, however, when it came time to elect class officers or club leaders. “Let’s make Donna treasurer,” someone would shout. “She’ll keep track of our money.”

Whenever there was a party or social, a school fund-raiser or a special Christmas dance, I was asked to help organize it.

I didn’t think about long-range planning until I went to work part-time in my father’s real estate office during my mid-teen years. My father based his activities on a seven-day planner: a binder with legal-size paper, each sheet being divided into seven days. Across the top of the page, Dad wrote his appointments and the jobs he needed to do that week. He gave me one of those books right away.

Teenagers always have trouble taking orders from their parents, and I was no exception. I resisted using Dad's planner. After all, I had my little steno pad, and I always kept the appointments I made. My father was trying to stretch me, however, and eventually he won me over.

Learning basic organizational skills helped me in the job market too. One summer during a lull in my father's business, I took a part-time job in a clothing boutique as a salesclerk. Mrs. Rubel, the owner, let me use part of her desk as a place to tally my orders. Within a week on the job, I had the desk cleaned and organized. Mrs. Rubel was so impressed by my initiative, she assigned me to work the cash register and help keep the account records. I logged extra hours and drew extra pay because I evidenced good organization.

Developing a Planner

Later I went to work for my father as a licensed real estate agent. I was still using a notebook planner augmented by my father's long-range planning sheets, but I found it too limited for my new needs as a working adult. So I experimented with a variety of 3-ring, 6-ring, even 12-ring notebooks, which I customized with divider tabs, notecards, and folders. They were good—even functional—but never exactly right.

Finally I saw an ad for a three-ring binder just for real estate agents. Each day page was marked so you could record appointments and expenses. Another section had forms to record properties listed and sold, interviews made, and contacts with bankers. Amortization and commission schedules were in the front of the book. The book was two or three inches deep, which was much too bulky, but I used it faithfully.

I ran into trouble, however, when I used my real estate planning book to record personal things—shopping lists, friends' telephone numbers, and my household budget. The book was not designed for that, and so it became a maze of scribbles, color codes, and dog-eared pages.

I searched bookstores, stationery outlets, and gift shops in a diligent

effort to find a planner that could fit both my personal and business needs. There was no such thing. Necessity proved once again to be the mother of invention. I went back to buying notebooks and creating my own customized planners. I modified them as each month passed. I began to get closer and closer to my dream planner.

Accepting the Challenge of Change

After I married David Otto, I continued to sell real estate. As part of my ongoing training, I took classes in time management, salesmanship, and business organization. I continued to modify my planner, which I have always called my “daybook,” to fit new needs.

A career opportunity opened up for David in Arizona, so we moved there. Now I had the opportunity to apply everything I had learned about life management to my housekeeping. I created an efficient kitchen, a labeled and organized pantry, an entertainment schedule for guests, a chores list for our daughter, and a variety of other helpful and useful procedures. I had previously shared organizational tips and aids with one or two friends and a couple of women’s groups. Now more and more women’s groups began to call on me to speak at their meetings. Soon I began to teach “More Hours in My Day” classes on home and family organization with a new friend, Emilie Barnes, who is the originator of this seminar.

My planner had become so essential to me, I decided to manufacture my daybook and market it under the trade name of *Donna’s DATES and DOs*. Once I discovered the overwhelming costs involved in such a production effort, I gave up. I knew there was a crying need for such a product, but it was just not within my means to manufacture, publicize, distribute, market, and sell it.

During this time, David reminded me of his favorite saying: “*The common begin, the uncommon finish*. Keep your planner. Wait for an opportunity. Be ready.”

Well, I did keep the planner and I did wait—for years. When I made

“Accept the Challenge of Change” my goal statement one year, I didn’t know why. The line just came to me one day as I was thinking about my future goals, as I do once every year. This challenge of change exceeded all my expectations, for not long after, I received an invitation to write a book that would help women learn to organize their lives.

I struggled with that offer for some time because I had never written a book and doing so would require a lot of adjustments in my life. I must confess, even though I had chosen “Accept the Challenge of Change” as that year’s goal, I still hated to change.

For years my family has called me a “stick in the mud.” I am a woman who uses a fountain pen and carries bottles of ink with her. Oh, I know. I can get the cartridges. But the cartridge ink is not quite as nice or as rich in color as the bottled ink. So I use bottled ink. I am also a woman who still starches her husband’s shirts by dipping them in boiling starch water and letting them dry until they become like boards. No, like most people, I don’t like to change.

Nevertheless, I’ve learned that we must seek change for ourselves. We must adapt, advance, and progress. Donna Otto must *expect* to be different a year from now, just as you must expect that of yourself. And so I wrote the book. I accepted the challenge of change.

The Real Thing

You have encountered many deceptive things in your life. There never was a real Betty Crocker or a real Miss Lonelyhearts or a real Aunt Jemima or a real Uncle Sam. They were all manufactured to create a human element of credibility for marketable products. But, folks, there is a *real* Donna Otto.

I have spent time in this opening chapter introducing myself to you because I want you to know that the plans and systems and ideas in the following chapters were devised by a *real* woman. I’m someone just like you. I too have a household to run, a husband to love, and a speaking and writing

career to manage. I also have a daughter, a son-in-law, and a grandchild. I have dishwater hands (if I'm not careful) and some gray hairs. And I too must fight the battle of the bulge.

When I've failed, I've learned from it. When I've succeeded, I've capitalized on it. I've taken the seeds of organization given to me by my mother, my father, education courses, my friend and colleague Emilie Barnes, and the thousands of students in my classes and seminars, and I've added my Aunt Pat's love of hospitality (you'll meet Aunt Pat in the next chapter). I've planted and nurtured the best of these ideas until they grew into this book.

And so I put it to you now: If you too are willing to accept the challenge of change, then read on.

Remember, "The common begin, the uncommon finish."