

There's a classic illustration of filling a jar with sand and big rocks. Put the sand in first and the rocks won't fit. Put the rocks in first and the sand fills the space around the rocks and everything fits. The time management application is that we should do big, important tasks first before doing lesser things.



That's good advice...sometimes. It might even be good advice for most people, most of the time. But – and this won't set well if you're a “big rock” fan – it ranks among the worst advice I've personally ever received.

That metaphor made sense to me and I fought long and hard to make it work. But somehow it didn't have the desired effect. I eventually realized that when I tackled the big task first, that task took longer than it did if I did things in a different order. Taking longer meant I had less time for the lesser tasks so at the end of the day I had accomplished less.

I'll explain why, but first let me emphasize that I am *not* campaigning against doing the big tasks first. If that works for you, do it! But we're not all wired the same, so what works for many people doesn't

necessarily work for everyone. This isn't just about the big rock theory, but about any one-size-fits-all advice. We need to know ourselves enough to recognize whether a best-practice for the masses is best-practice for us.

After years of what's-wrong-with-me guilt and frustration because I couldn't get the “best practice” to work, I finally recognized why. Here are two of the reasons:

- **I'm easily distracted.** If I try to do the one big thing first, I can't focus on that one big task because my mind continually drifts to the nine little things waiting in the wings. Without that focus, I pay a price in re-entry time every time I refocus on the big task. It's amazing how easily that turns a four-hour task into six. Fewer distractions, higher focus.
- **I'm energized by getting things done.** If I can spend two hours getting five or six things done before I tackle the “big rock”, I'm charged up for the big task.

Big rock advocates will quickly point out the weakness of this approach. I could spend my whole day working on little tasks and run out of time before getting to the big one. They are right. I must be disciplined enough to move from little tasks to the big one while I still have time with some margin. If you lack that self-discipline, stick with the big-rock-first approach. Better to accept the reduced productivity than not get the important stuff done.

One more caution: Just because the big-rock-first (or any other discipline) doesn't work the first time or two doesn't mean it won't work when it becomes habit. Don't abandon it too quickly.

The point: Know thyself. Experiment with alternatives to “common wisdom”. The crowd may be right – or not.

enLumen Leadership Services: Lighting your path to better leadership.