



Ugly Organiz

by Jeff Copper, PCC, PCAC, MBA

Look up the word *organized* and you'll find definitions made up of words or phrases like "having formal structure," "systematized," "formed into structure," "planned," or "controlled." The word conjures up visions of stores, warehouses, storage facilities, filing cabinets, and bookshelves with things in rows, stacks, columns, all with tags, labels, or identifiers, or color-coded by categories or associations with something. This picture implies everything is in its place. It's easy to access and there is ample space.

This image of perfection is really quite pleasing to the eye. In other words, it's **pretty**. I'll leave it to the researchers to prove whether I'm right or wrong, but my experience as an attention coach is that many people associate "pretty" with being organized. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with an aesthetically pleasing space with everything in its place.

I would argue that it really isn't organized if it doesn't pass the litmus test, which is... can you find what you need when you need it? Even better, can you find what you need when you need it and put your hands on it quickly? If that pretty space doesn't pass the litmus test, then, it isn't organized.

What I have learned through experience is that some of the best organizational systems are just plain **ugly**. The workbench in my garage is a perfect example. To the untrained eye, it looks like chaos and is quite ugly, but we can assure you it passes the litmus test. When I need something, I can walk up to the bench and find it in an instant. Granted, anyone else would be lost trying to find something as simple as a hammer there, but understand, it's my garage.

I suspect it is puzzling to many of you how I can find what I'm looking for. What's my system? It can't just be chaos. Granted, it looks like one big mess, and while I can't necessarily articulate it or I'm not consciously aware of the system, it just works. I suspect that the system is built around how my brain thinks and is rein-

forced by routine and habit. My wife regularly suggests that I organize it, make it pretty. I steadfastly resist. If it were organized, I wouldn't be able to find anything.

I'm not here to say you have to do it any specific way. The point is... if ugly works, don't get pressured into turning your space into nonfunctional pretty. The alternative is to decorate ugly to make it pretty or make it look like it's supposed to be that way.

For example, John has a two-story house with white carpet. To keep his house clean (and pretty), the family kicks their shoes off at the door. For years, Eric focused on the need to put shoes in the closet where they belong (pretty). Problem is... he and other family members have ADHD, and so, distractions always sabotaged the execution and shoes ended up all over the house.

In the end, things are neither pretty nor functional, because no one could ever find their shoes. The day John embraced the beauty of ugly organizational systems things changed. His mandate was to leave your shoes at the door. Over time, shoes from all closets migrated to the pile at the door. Granted, it was ugly, this mound of shoes, but everyone knew exactly where the shoes were. Shoes rarely worn would be found in the middle at the bottom of the mound. Everyday shoes were on top. It was unsightly, but functionally, it was virtually flawless. Everyone knew exactly where their shoes were. To improve aesthetics and limit the sprawl,

Shared Systems

Shared ugly organizational systems, by definition, are not organized if they don't pass the litmus test: Can you find what you need when you need it? In such situations one must negotiate an optimum system based on the litmus test. That doesn't mean it has to be pretty... maybe just cute!

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John found a huge bin to place at the door. Intended to house the shoes in a more decorative fashion, the bin served as a visual statement that this is where the shoes belong.

Repetitive, boring, routine things don't capture the attention of those with ADHD. The many steps required to process such dull tasks exponentially increase friction and the likelihood the tasks won't be executed. Take laundry, for example. You take shirts out of the dryer, fold them, walk into the bedroom, open the drawer, wrestle with the overstuffed drawer to insert the shirts in a nice, neat fashion, and close the drawer. Repeat. Right, like that's going to happen. Such systems are pretty but you've got ADHD (or you wouldn't be reading this). So, confess: You struggle to find any article of clothing when you need it. Who knows where it is? And your drawer is the most unlikely place.

Picture this... move the washer and dryer into what was a spare bedroom and turn it into one big closet or changing room. Now, when looking for your shirt, you'll find it either on the floor with

the dirty clothes, or in the washer or dryer, or in the pile of clothes on top of whatever space is set up for clothes that are supposed to be put away but never are. You might have to look in a few different locations, but if whatever you are looking for exists, it is likely in that room.

I'm not suggesting you let your garage run amok, pile your shoes in a box at the door, or move your closet into the laundry room, but I am suggesting this: If your organizational system is ugly, it doesn't mean it doesn't work. Try decorating and formalizing it—or own it as your own system that works flawlessly. If you do, you might be surprised at how much better you feel if you rid yourself of the guilt, shame, and judgment caused by obsessing over creating a pretty system—only to find that you can't find a thing. 🗨

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The author's own garage workbench