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Arts & Living

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Before & After

With a little help from her new friend, Bath woman gets grip on that messy work area. You, too, can do a makeover.

Mary Beth Breckenridge – Beacon Journal

With a little reorganization, Mary Colarik has found the top of her kitchen desk. More importantly, though, she's found a sense of peace.

The desk had long been a source of stress for the Bath Township woman, who had never figured out a way to deal effectively with the papers, directories, greeting cards, office supplies and other stuff that cluttered its surface and jammed it cupboards and drawers. She'd tried a number of organizing tactics – separate boxes for specific types of paperwork, a basket for her catalogs, a cupboard dedicated to cards and stationery – but eventually the containers overflowed and the shelves got disheveled.

The mess drove her crazy. It also drove her to enter the Beacon Journal's reorganization contest, in which she was chosen for an organizational makeover by Chris Perrow of Organizing S.O.S. in Silver Lake (330.686.0282 or www.perrowsystems.com). Today Colarik's desk is clear of clutter, its tops streamlined and its shelves and drawers all designated and outfitted for specific purposes.

"I feel really peaceful and relieved," Colarik said, happily sliding open drawers to reveal contents corralled in their assigned places. She remembered how embarrassed she'd been during Perrow's first visit, when she had struggled to open one overstuffed drawer. "I'm actually a pretty organized person, but I think the kids and life just got out of hand."

What Perrow and Colarik did was set up a system, a method of dealing with all the paperwork, appointments, commitments and needs of day-to-day family life. It's more than just a series of files and storage containers; it's a routine in which those storage tools are a means, not an end.

The system they developed is tailored to Colarik's needs, but Perrow said the basic process of developing a system works for any organizing challenge. Here's how they did it, and how you can apply their experience to your own home.

Step 1 – Assess

The first step is reorganizing is assessing the current space and how it fits in with your organization goals, Perrow said. The aim is to look over what you have and think about how

you would like to use that area.

On Perrow's first visit to Colarik's house, the two opened doors and drawers, peered into cupboards and got a sense of the space available in Colarik's desk area. They also talked about how Colarik imagined using that space.

This is the point in the organizing process for envisioning. Consider your family's needs and your goals for the space, Perrow said. Do you need a place to leave messages for one another, for example? A better way of keeping track of



Paul Tople, Akron Beacon Journal

Professional organizer Chris Perrow (left) assesses desk clutter in Mary Colarik's Bath Township home.

appointments and activities? A way to streamline the morning rush? Talk those needs and goals over with your family members to get their input, and write the goals down, she suggested.

Colarik wanted a functional family command center, a place where everything she needed would be close at hand and easy to find. But she was stymied by the sheer volume of paperwork contributed by the five family members – herself, husband Michael and children Courtney, 14, Devon, 12, and Cassidy, 9. Her husband takes care of his own paperwork, but the children contribute an overwhelming amount because they all attend different schools and are involved in extracurricular activities. Colarik's own schedule is crammed with tennis, volunteer activities and other commitments.

What Colarik needed was a place to store it all, but in a way that wouldn't let her forget about the things that needed her attention.

Step 2 – Analyze

Next comes the reality check: looking carefully at how the space is currently being used and determining what works and what doesn't.

Colarik's problem wasn't lack of space. Her desk area has cupboards, shelves and drawers in abundance. Nor was her problem

complete chaos. She already had a series of boxes on an upper shelf, labeled for items such as books of checks, event tickets and lost-and-found items; a color-coded calendar of family activities posted on the bulletin board; and a good habit of talking with her children every day after school to discuss homework, go over papers and note their activities on the calendar.

Step 3 – Sort

It's tempting to run out and buy all kinds of organizing supplies at this point, but resist the urge, Perrow cautioned. Before you figure out how to handle and store all your things, you need to know exactly what you have and how much space it takes up.

Perrow suggested sorting into piles of related things – for example, items that require action, volunteer activities, each child's school information, each child's extracurricular activities, bills, family medical information and so on. Throw out what you don't need or won't use.

If you're not sure where something belongs, talk yourself through a decision-making process, Perrow said. Ask yourself what you need the item for, what action it requires of you and when you need to make a decision on it.

If you still can't decide, set the item aside, she said. You can come back to it later when you're feeling calm and better able to make a decision.

Colarik expected the task of sorting through the papers on her desktop to be daunting. Instead, she was surprised that the job took only about 45 minutes.

Step 4 – Systemize

Once you can see exactly what you have to work with, you can start assigning everything a home.

Perrow was a big help on this, because she could draw on ideas she'd come across in her work or systems she's helped her clients set up. If you don't have the luxury of a personal Organizer, organizing books are also good sources of ideas.

Step 1:
ASSESS

Step 2:
ANALYZE

Step 3:
SORT

Step 4:
SYSTEMIZE

Step 5:
FOLLOW THROUGH

Step By Step Getting Organized

For Colarik, one of Perrow's central suggestions was an action file, place on her desk for keeping items that need her attention. The type they settled on was a desktop hanging-file holder in which Colarik could keep a limited number of folders labeled with the actions needed, such as "bills to pay", "correspondence" and "errands." The idea is to drop paperwork or reminder notes into the folders and then check them regularly – an essential part of the process.

For storing each family member's papers, Perrow recommended magazine files, rectangular boxes used for storing magazines upright. She labeled a container for each child and one for Colarik, and filled each with that person's papers. Those went on a shelf above the desk.

Colarik also started a binder for her family's vital records, in which she can keep immunization records, copies of birth certificates and other information that's nice to have on hand when she's filling out applications, emergency-contact forms and the like. She even put her family's genealogy information in there.

Perrow and Colarik dedicated specific areas of the desk and cupboards for storing other items. One drawer is just for Colarik's office supplies, arranged in an organizer tray. Another drawer holds supplies the children can share. Cards and stationery are gathered on one shelf, with greeting cards separated into small plastic baskets labeled by occasion: birthday, get well, etc.

Perrow recommended Colarik retain her system of tossing contractor's business cards into one drawer and take-out menus into another. It may not be tidy, but it works, Perrow said. She also said Colarik could keep gathering catalogs in a basket under her desk, as long as she purged it periodically.

Whatever system you choose, make sure it's one you're comfortable using, Perrow cautioned. Everyone is different, she said, and what works for one person isn't necessarily right for another.

Every space is different, too. So don't forget to measure all the drawers, shelves and upright spaces before you go shopping for supplies.

Step 5 – Follow through

A system is only as good as the person who uses it. You can set up all the files and storage containers you like, but if you don't make a point of using them regularly, they're just more clutter.

Training the rest of the family to use the system is another challenge. Perrow recommended showing everyone where things go and how the system works, and labeling files and storage containers to make family participation easier.

Getting used to a new way of organizing things can take time, she said. But Colarik found that the satisfaction of having an organized desk is giving her the motivation to keep it that way – and even to start reorganizing other areas of the house.

For her, that's good feeling.

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Organizing Pro Shares Tips On Organization

Neat ideas from professional organizer Chris Perrow:

- ❖ Set up a small hanging file folder in an accessible place, such as next to the kitchen phone. Use it to hold information that requires you to do something, either now or in the future.

Make folders for whatever actions you need to be reminded of. Suggestions from Perrow include "bills to pay;" "calls;" "computer entry;" for information you need to enter into the computer; "correspondence;" "discuss;" for items you want to remember to discuss with a family member; and "errands to run."

An expandable "pending" folder could hold things like tickets, fund-raisers order forms and invitations, or you could include a series of folders for each month of the year, as Mary Colarik did. That way, she can store and be reminded of things that need action months in the future – for example, the summer-camp information she is already gathering but won't make a decision on until February.

Perrow is a champion of vertical files as opposed to horizontal ones, because you can drop things in with very little effort and see what the folders contain at a glance. When papers are stored horizontally, you can't see the different sizes and shapes of papers, she explained, so finding what you need takes more time.

- ❖ Start a family records binder to hold vital information such as Social

Security numbers, medical records, copies of birth certificates and information about where your will is kept. For important papers, make copies for the binder and keep the originals in a safe place.

Binder inserts with pockets are handy for holding small items.

- ❖ Take advantage of all available space for organizing. Even if you don't have drawers or shelves for storing papers and supplies, you might have a vertical surface such as a wall or cupboard door. Hanging pockets, over-the-door organizers and containers that attach to cork boards might work for you.

- ❖ Mount a spring clip labeled for each child in a place where he or she will see it on the way out the door. There you can clip lunch money, papers that need to be returned to school, reminder notes and other things you don't want the kids to forget. Perrow simply tacked the clips to Colarik's bulletin board.

- ❖ Go to the bank periodically and get 50 one-dollar bills, then hide them someplace. You'll always have small amounts of money on hand and won't be stuck forking over a \$20 bill to your second-grader for lunch money.

- ❖ If you regularly carry paperwork to meetings, keep everything related to that organization in a canvas bag rather than in a file. You'll always know where the papers are, and you can just grab the bag and go.

– Mary Beth Breckenridge

Advice From The Organizing Pro

Advice from professional organizer Chris Perrow:

- ❖ Organization is NOT the same as tidiness. Organization means you can find what you need, when you need it.
- ❖ There is no right or wrong way to organize your home. There is only YOUR way.
- ❖ To avoid feeling overwhelmed by a big reorganization project, break it down into baby steps and concentrate on only one step at a time. For example, pick a place where you can leave your work out for a week or so, and work only one hour at a time. Or, cordon off part of a room with duct tape and work only within the tape.
- ❖ Feelings of guilt and failure only drain people of energy. Instead of telling yourself, "My mother's house was never like this," remember that our society didn't used to prize acquisition as much as it does now.
- ❖ Resist the urge to put the organizing cart before the horse. Don't buy tools such as crates and color-coded file folders until you've assessed what you have, visualized what you want it to look like and figured out a system for handling it.
- ❖ Organization is a learned skill. Even the people who seemed to have been born organized picked it up from someone, probably a parent.
- ❖ You can guide a spouse, but don't expect to change him or her. However, you are responsible for teaching organization to your children.