Cut to the Chase
Stuart R. Levine

The Big Idea
Business guru and author Stuart Levine simplifies the rules to time and resource management in ninety-nine or so lessons that aim to maximize time, productivity and efficiency. With most of us having a million things to do while anticipating another million things that will surely come, Cut to the Chase looks at the numerous strategies to help the busy bee prioritize tasks to get more done, to work out what really matters and strike a balance between the professional and personal life.

At the very core of Levine’s management principles is a close examination of one’s communication skills, and how clear and intelligent means of clarifying and expressing what you want can lead to surprising results. Managers who are able to “cut to the chase” and express their ideas up front are able to enjoy more time and energy doing the things that matter.

Why You Need This Book
Though a hundred lessons may seem daunting and can even be simplified further, the wisdom is hard to argue with and the reader will eventually zero-in on the ideas most meaningful to them, or to the ideas that make sense to their present concerns and preoccupation. With sharp insights offering advice and tips that can be applied in different possible circumstances, Cut to the Chase is meant to be read over and over again.

Start Now!
The lessons in the first part of Cut to the Chase deal with knowing what you need, what you want and keeping focused on them. The biggest hindrance to any one singular task is a multitude of other tasks totally unrelated to it. When we work, emotions, inefficient habits, and even other people distract us. One should find not just motivation to work, but the purpose of work, no matter how small the task seems to be in order to free the mind of unnecessary clutter drawing away precious time and energy. Consider these different starts:

1. Cut to the chase. Define your purpose, know your world, concentrate.

2. Just start. Think of delays as those unnecessary distractions.

3. Get in early and go home on time. The fifteen minutes it takes you to settle in—talking to your office mates, making personal phone calls, etc.—is also fifteen minutes you lose at the end of the day.

4. I got it. If you understand what someone is saying, carry on and avoid redundant instructions or useless conversations.

5. The first twenty minutes... is crucial and sets the pace for the rest of the day. Identify priorities, update your ‘To Do’ list, review your calendar, think of your last minute concerns for meetings, and go over your projects for the next week or month.

6. You’re killing me. I got the point, let’s move on. Find something funny to say to get rid of useless repetition.
7. Get over it. Angered over someone or something? Get over it and carry on.

8. It’s not always about you. People go through bad days and different moods, including your self. When you encounter cranky officemates and bosses, their problem might be about something else and not you.

9. What’s keeping you up at night? Listen to your deepest concerns. When the day’s issues start to nag at you, make a note. It will be easy to let go of them without necessarily forgetting them.

10. Don’t hide your passion. If you’re enthusiastic for what you do, show it. Enthusiasm stirs others to action.

Think Clearly
Knowing is half the battle, so the saying goes. Knowing what you want to achieve simplifies what you have to work on since all the tasks you need to do will have to be more coherent.

11. Start with the end in mind. Know the purpose of everything you do, let others know what you want to achieve, stay focused on your goals.

12. Focus on one thing at a time. Multitasking is overrated. Organize your work so you can do one thing at a time and do it well.

13. Organize yourself first. Don’t waste time looking for things. Put them where they should be and save time.

14. Assumptions kill. Don’t assume people know what you want. If it’s important for you, take the time to make sure it was communicated well so that it gets done properly.

15. Think in bullets. Consider bullet points instead of long sentences. They get right to the point.

16. Trust your gut. It pays to listen to your intuition. If you feel something is wrong, don’t ignore it. Take the time to investigate and analyze.

17. Predict how long things will take. You can’t control time but you can budget it. Knowing how long things take is a long-term skill to learn and helps in making more realistic goals.

18. Tailor your message to your audience. Don’t be too focused on your message that you lose sight of who it’s for. Knowing your audience will help you send your point across.

19. What’s been getting better lately—and why? It’s not just failure that needs to be examined. Success needs to be duplicated as well, and improved upon.

Speed Up
Time is of the essence. Getting more things done means making the most out of time. Be conscious of time. A good project often falters once people realize there isn’t enough time to execute its finer details. Being able to work faster and more efficiently can also mean getting to your goals of success faster too.

20. Explode out of the blocks. Treat your day like a hundred-meter dash. Eat a healthy breakfast, stretch, walk, exercise. A good start in your day means easy sailing ahead.

21. Every second counts. Unfortunately, the many seconds that make up a week, or even a minute are lost on planning and not knowing what we want. If you find yourself lost like this, sit back and plan again rather than do a number of actions with no one singular plan behind them.
22. **Know how things really get done.** Get down and dirty. The best managers know every inch of the operation. A lack of foresight on how and how long a specific task is carried out stalls projects.

23. **Build momentum.** Good results are the products of a sustained enthusiasm towards one goal. Measure and communicate success throughout the project.

24. **Make sure your handoffs are clean.** Scheduling a project requiring different people or different teams and departments’ demands coordination and concentration.

25. **Bag Consensus.** The best choices are not decided with a consensus but with a firm and definitive idea of what needs to be accomplished.

26. **Break through silos.** Break down the big silos that hinder the communication lines between team members. It doesn’t only help accomplish tasks, it also helps in building better relationships.

27. **Appeal to their enlightened self-interest.** When trying to sell a product or an idea, don’t just talk about the product but also talk about how it will change the lives of the people you are talking to. You’ll get their commitment faster, and that commitment will help you get more things done.

28. **Measure twice, cut once.** The old carpenter’s adage does not only save resources, it also saves time. Time is the most important resource. Plan things out carefully.

29. **Close the loop.** Never leave other people hanging. The same logic is true about projects and commitments. Never start anything you can’t finish, or commit to work you can’t accomplish.

30. **Call an audible.** Anticipate change before it happens. Don’t be caught unprepared when the times change.

31. **Beat change to the punch.** Change may not necessarily be bad, it could be a sign of new opportunities to come.

32. **To speed up, slow down.** Heed the signs that you’re moving too fast and creating un-needed follow-up work that is stressful and time consuming. Working too fast may cause you to lose sight of the details that make your work and life better.

**Be Direct**

“Honesty is the best policy.” Don’t sugarcoat what needs to be said, don’t run around in circles when you can go direct to the point, don’t beat around the bush when you don’t have time to spare. Being direct could be the best gift you can give yourself and the people you work with.

33. **Teach people how to use your time.** You can’t make the most out of your time if the people around you don’t cooperate. Tell them what you want, how much time you have in your hands, and how much time specific tasks need to be done.

34. **Treat others’ time as you would your own.** Before you bother anyone with a request, make sure you know what it is you are asking from him or her. It’s your job to have thought that through before approaching them.

35. **Know what’s being asked of you.** Before forging ahead on a task or a project, make sure you know what is needed from you. It’s a big waste of time to move forward second-guessing every step of the way.
36. If you want something, ask for it. You can’t assume people know everything you need. The more specific you are about what you need, the faster you’ll get it.

37. Tell them if the baby is ugly. When someone has a new idea, they lose all objectivity. Nip a bad idea in the bud before investing precious time and energy on a project that has all the signs of turning awry.

38. Cut to the chase without drawing blood. Don’t steamroll over colleagues in an attempt to tell them what you want. You may be cutting them off altogether. Cut to the chase, but be respectful.

39. Make sure everyone has the map. Make maps, guides, and lists of things done and to be done as you move about the project. Give liberty for everyone to find their own way, just make sure they get there on time.

40. Tell them what’s on the test. Tell everyone how performance will be measured. Let that be one of your guideposts.

41. Know your work style—and theirs. Everyone works differently. Know it, and deal with it.

42. Clear the air. Nothing stalls work more than un-needed tension. Avoid the build-up of tension, clear things out while they are still manageable.

43. Cut the bull. When you have something to say, say it candidly and avoid beating around the bush.

44. Create a “no loitering” zone. Spell it out, make it known that you do not want to be bothered.

45. You can’t please everyone. When someone asks for an unreasonable request, it’s alright to say no.

Meet Smarter
Meetings are unusually long and counter-productive. A lot of time and energy is lost due to the inability to bring the point across, of having to illustrate the point towards the end of the meeting, instead of the beginning. Coming to the meeting prepared guarantees discussions will stay on course, and everyone will be focused on the right goals.

46. People hate meetings for a reason. That’s because they’re usually long, tedious and filled with unnecessary detail. Make it concise but complete.

47. Every conversation should have a purpose. A lot don’t count the time they spend in informal meetings. Always keep your eye on your purpose.

48. 120 seconds and out. Don’t convert brief tasks and consultations into long conversations. Sign papers, delegate tasks, answer questions and make clarifications in two minutes or less.

49. Know when you’re not needed. If you have no business in a meeting, don’t go. Save your time and focus on more productive tasks.

50. Master the ten-minute meeting. Keep discussions moving but stay on-point.

51. Count noses. Know from whom you are getting support from and use this to strategize for your next move. It is crucial to get support from key individuals.

52. Stay on course. Don’t be distracted by the details of carrying-on a project. Schedule periodic meetings, receive updates and make sure everyone is on the same boat.
53. Don’t grandstand. Don’t dominate conversations, you might be suppressing ideas from the others.

54. Have a meeting before the meeting. Pre-meetings are crucial especially when you have a big meeting coming. Work closely with your team and make sure everyone understands the immediate concerns.

55. Debrief. Talk things through especially at the end of a big project. Reinforce your strengths and work on your weaknesses.

56. Stay in touch. Gather feedback from everyone you work with, whether it’s someone directly under your supervision, or a customer you just know.

57. Master the graceful exit. End on a high note. Keep the optimism up.

58. Recognize when it’s all been said... so you will know when it’s time to move forward.

Move Forward
Success is often measured by our ability to calculate risk. Always look at the bigger picture and see how smaller details affect the outcome of a project.

59. Look at the big picture. A SWOT analysis is in order. It pays to know your Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.

60. Know your weaknesses but play to your strengths. Focus on the positive. While it’s useless to dwell on what you cannot or failed to do, it’s stupid to ignore and forget it completely.

61. Think three moves ahead. Long-term goals should always be clear with every small step you make.

62. Know when your career is stuck. Avoid projects or roles that will keep you far longer in a place and position where you will not grow.

63. Make opportunity happen. Opportunities don’t happen by chance. You have to be keen on identifying them the moment they present themselves to you.

64. Delegate. Knowing the right person for the right task is crucial in any undertaking. Leadership is just as effective as one’s ability to delegate.

65. Life is a negotiation. Working with others requires compromises. Negotiate, learn to give and take, but make sure it doesn’t take too much of your time.

66. Know when to wait. Timing is just as important as making the most out of time. Plan and execute specific activities at the right time and place.

67. Know when not to wait. Sometimes, you have to take risks. Some matters require urgent decision-making, and doing so is a sign of maturing professionally.

68. If you need a drummer, hire a drummer. Hire someone with the right skills and experience. The same goes with delegating tasks. Good and competent professionals make for the best resource in any company.

69. Don’t be afraid to hire people you are going to lose. Employers are afraid to hire people who aspire to move up quickly for fear of having to retrain new employees. When everything else is even, always hire the candidate with more aspiration.
Cut Back
Success is tantamount to knowing limitations and weaknesses. Successful professionals can’t do everything right, they just have to demonstrate how great they are at a few set of related tasks and abilities.

70. Decide what not to do. In deciding what is truly important, you may have to drop everything else you are doing.

71. Addition by subtraction. Add more to your life and career by keeping people who contribute more instead of taking away from our lives. Be wary of friends and colleagues who rob off your energy and resources.

72. Rip it in half. The more important your message, the shorter time it should take you to deliver it.

73. The highlighter is mightier than the sword. Highlight important details of your message with gestures, pitch volume, and even pictures.

74. A picture is worth a thousand words. Images convey far better ideas than words.

75. Tell a story. Nothing makes a stronger point than a story. People relate to it easily.

76. On it. Pending. Done. Develop shorthand signs with your colleagues. Agree on common office and task vocabulary, color-code your post-its, and communicate without talking.

77. ...To get to the other side. In a meeting, consider giving the conclusion first. It’s the best way to make a point and grabbing attention.

78. Weed out your reading pile. Distill your reading materials into a manageable pile. If things are stuck on your desk for months, chances are you will never get to them.

79. TMI (too much information). Streamline the amount of information you receive. Focus only on those that will help you directly.

80. Good enough is good enough. While there’s nothing wrong with wanting to do your best, it pays to have realistic expectations about what you are able to deliver.

Watch Out
Heed the warnings: when your gut tells you something isn’t right, chances are it’s right. Be sensitive even to the slightest changes affecting you and your company. While you can’t control the quality of your life, you can make steps to maintain it and/or make it better. The first step is to be sensitive.

81. Your time is your life. Value your time and know what you want to do with it. Don’t allow yourself to be consumed by too much work or any one singular activity that will detract you from your other responsibilities.

82. Don’t let your Blackberry be a Crackberry. Don’t let gadgets such as mobile phones and PDA’s dictate the pace of your life. Learn to turn them off, and take charge of your own life.

83. Avoid toxic people. Good company offers you something. If people take away time and energy from you without giving it back, stand clear.

84. Don’t let distractions derail you. Focus. Know your tasks, your deadlines and your goals. Let nothing stand in their way especially on your time to work.
85. Don’t hang in the door and chat. The thirty seconds you spend on the doorway just to say hi can translate to numerous hours in a year. Respect other people’s time the same way you like them to respect yours.

86. Cut down on the fire drills. Never wait until the last minute. Know what you have to do so as to avoid begging other people for help in the eleventh hour.

87. Know when you’re stuck. Being able to admit you are stuck will allow you to solve task-related problems more systematically. Seek advice, grab someone, and ask for fresh eyes to help you see things through.

88. When you hear something once, pay attention. When you hear it twice, act. Listen to feedback. Thank the people who give them to you. Act on them.

89. If you sense trouble, do something. Small problems can snowball into bigger ones. Work on problems while they are still manageable.

90. Procrastination takes years off your life. The worst part of responsibilities is not what we need to do, but the things we keep putting off. They cause a lot of stress and clutter the mind.

91. Don’t confuse activity with accomplishment. Being busy doesn’t mean you are being productive. You can be busy as a bee and never accomplish anything.

92. Don’t make the same mistake twice. Take different mistakes as a sign of growth. If you keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again, you are wasting time.

93. Sweat the small stuff. Details make all the difference. Pay attention to smaller details. It will help you paint a clearer image of the bigger picture.

94. Don’t let a difficult worker dominate your life. Focus on the tasks you need to accomplish. No amount of petty behavior can hold you back. Do your work, focus on it, and the rewards will come.

95. Manage your personal life as well as your professional life. It is difficult to work if there are a lot of problems in your private life. Stay on top of things so they don’t pile up.

96. Renew yourself everyday. Run, do yoga, listen to music, dance, read a book.

97. Take back the weekend. Spending time on weekends for yourself and loved ones will set up more relaxed workdays.

98. Turn the page. Take time away from work to recharge and renew your self.

99. Know when to put the book down. Take time off, use your vacation leave, know when you need to recharge for a longer period of time to give yourself more energy at work.

100. A bottle of wine, a cut flower. Cherish the moments of your personal life. Doing so will make you appreciate and reinforce the good habits you keep at work.

Find Balance
The stereotype of a successful professional is one who is married to his work. Success can be enjoyed while still being able to maintain a life outside it.