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Effective Time and Communication Management

The goal of this paper will be to identify what is important, in both the long and short term, and how to make the most of every day so that you are effectively making use of your time and communication with others.

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Effective Time and Communication Management

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Abstract

This paper will discuss how to manage your time to ensure you are focusing your work on the business rather than in the business. Managers are continually bombarded with requests that may consume a great deal of time but do not provide value back to the business. It will be important to distinguish between those tasks that can be transitioned to trusted employees and those that require managerial review and approval. Along with effective time management, this paper will discuss various management styles required to resolve issues and keep the team focused on forward progress. The goal will be to provide managers with some real world examples of how to make the most of their time and to ensure their team is focused on meeting their objectives.

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1. Introduction

Time is a constant yet somehow it seems to move faster the older you get. Long gone are those elementary and high school summers spent playing in the backyard or riding bikes with friends until the sun goes down. Now it seems we're celebrating New Years Eve and throwing back the champagne one night and wake up to find Cinco de Mayo is next weekend. Life is all about balance and *working to live* not *living to work*. Ensuring you get back what you put in all depends on where you focus your effort. If you spend all your time putting out fires, and work in a very reactive mode, you'll never make any progress. Your days and weeks will fly by with little to nothing to show for it other than plenty of wrinkles and lost hair. Getting ahead requires discipline, self-motivation, and the ability to prioritize. Not everything should be treated as a fire drill and therefore there are certain things that can be put to the side or at least saved for later. The goal of this paper will be to identify what is important, in both the long and short term, and how to make the most of every day so that you are effectively making use of your time and communication with others.

2. Scope

This paper will identify some effective time and communication techniques to ensure you are making progress in your everyday life. It will touch on the establishment of goals, setting milestones, and ensuring you are staying on target to reach those goals. It will also discuss some "time thieves" or things that tend to eat away the day without providing any real value to you or your company. Along with discussing time management it will be important to understand good communication management as well. Very few of us, if ever, work in a vacuum, so it will be important to know how to communicate with your peers, executive management, and your direct reports as well. This paper is not intended to solve all your time constraining or communication issues, but rather provides a road map to aligning your daily activities to your long term goals.

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3. What Happened to the Day

Have you ever looked down at the clock at the bottom right of your computer only to ask yourself "What happened to the day?" If this happens to you more often than not, perhaps you might consider carving out a little 'personal time' to reflect on *where you are at* and *where you want to be*. The most effective managers are the ones that know what's going to happen before it does. This is not to say they are mind readers or fortune tellers but rather, they have taken the time to evaluate their environment and forecast the day's, week's, and month's events. As Louis Pasteur once said, "Chance favors the prepared mind." Louis wasn't claiming to know the future when he came up with the "Germ theory of disease" but rather that if given the proper preparation and study you'd be more likely to have events play into your favor. So instead of sitting back and waiting for life to come to you, a good manager will plan well in advance the events of not only the next day, but upwards of the next year. While this won't solve all your time constraint issues, it will be a good start.

In an age that thrives on information distribution, managers can be easily overwhelmed with a constant barrage of emails, voicemails, text messages, and instant messaging requests that may keep them from delivering value. In fact, business scholar Henry Mintzberg tells us, *"Study after study has shown that managers work at an unrelenting pace, that their activities are characterized by brevity, variety, and discontinuity, and that they are strongly oriented to action and dislike reflective activities."* (Harvard Business School, 2005, p.XIV) Little to no time is spent planning for the future or reflecting on the past but rather, time is spent rushing between meetings, fielding calls, and putting out proverbial fires or troubleshooting unplanned issues. *"The fragmented, rushed, and unplanned life Mintzberg describes is more reactive and spontaneous than planned; it explains, in part, why managers suffer stress and complain of never having enough time to do their job well."* (Harvard Business School, 2005, p.XV)

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4. Where do I Start

Your first step to effectively managing your time is to identify your goals. Find a quiet time and place either in the morning before work, at lunch, or late in the evening when you can sit down by yourself undisturbed. Start by jotting down some long term goals that you'd like to accomplish within your lifetime. Now take those goals and order them according to what's most important to you and then come up with a rough estimate of time it would take you to achieve each goal. Now conduct the same exercise but this time focus on your career goals either at your existing job, or the job you aim to have. Once you've done both of these, overlay these two sets of goals and combine them into one list and order by priority and see if there are any dependencies. For instance, if your goal is to travel to Europe for four weeks, but you currently only have two weeks of vacation, how long do you have to wait to earn four weeks or save up that much vacation? If your goal is to save twenty thousand dollars for a down payment on a house, how much can you save each month to reach that goal? If your goal is to become the Chief Information Officer of your company, what steps do you need to achieve, or other positions must you hold before being qualified for that job? Regardless of your goals, without having something to aim for, you will never achieve your maximum potential.

Now that you have identified and prioritized some long term goals, the next step will be to identify some short term goals. Focus on goals that will take less than a year to accomplish but should be at least a week or two of effort. Your goals should be focused on delivering value to your team and your company beyond the daily routine of your work. Once you've identified some short term goals, prioritize them based on the most value given back to your team along with ease of completion. It is often better to achieve some short term goals first and build confidence amongst your team rather than trying to tackle something extremely difficult upfront. Once you have prioritized the short term goals, merge them with the long term goals into one master list. Use the short term goals as milestones for tracking your success and closing the gaps to achieving your long term goals. This is what you will use as motivation and ensuring you are keeping pace. It is important to note that this list will be dynamic and may change at times in the positive (reaching your goals early) direction or sometimes in the negative (hitting some delays)

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direction. Keep this list in a visible place posted in your office, next to your computer so you are constantly reminded of what you are shooting for.

5. Time Thieves

In a perfect world everyone would be able to accomplish their goals on time and without conflicts. Unfortunately this is rarely the case because life has a way of throwing a curve-ball at you, when you least expect it. Regardless of this, you need to assume that this might happen and therefore should always have a contingency plan or strategy for handling that which throws you off pace of achieving your goals. Other than the uncontrollable events that happen to everyone from time to time, there are certain time-wasting activities or behaviors that should be managed. These "time thieves" as we'll call them include procrastination, excessive emailing, and excessive meetings.

5.1. Procrastination

Sometimes delays are not caused by some external factor but rather from ourselves, as is the case with procrastination. *"Procrastination is the habit of delaying or putting off doing something that should be done now."* (Harvard Business School, 2005, p.40) Everyone procrastinates to some extent whether at home or in the office leading to feelings of guilt or having that proverbial monkey on your back. This ultimately results in a bunch of half-completed tasks or project that will never reach their goal. Procrastination generally takes place because:

- *"The task is unpleasant or uninteresting.*
- *You fear failure*
- *You don't know where to begin"* (Harvard Business School, 2005, p.40)

5.2. Excessive Emailing

Another self inflicted cause for poor time management is excessive emailing. While emails do serve a valid business purpose and provide ease of communication, they are often overused and result in more time lost versus productive time spent working. Emails can provide a formal means of communication and serve as a record of events or dialog exchanged between multiple parties. The trouble is, many people tend to rely on

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email to answer questions that could take 1/10th the time to solve had the person just picked up the phone. A good rule of practice is that if it takes you five times longer to answer the email than it did to read it, just call. Another problem with email is that it continues to flow into your 'inbox" constantly throughout the day which provides a constant interruption. Multi-tasking does not allow you to juggle ten tasks each at 100% of your capacity but rather makes you do ten things at 1/10th your potential. Do you really want to be delivering something to executive management that had only 1/10th your attention?

5.3. Excessive Meetings

Meetings are an effective means of facilitating communication amongst the team to gather or distribute information but can also be a major consumption of time. While it is important to utilize meetings to provide status updates and to solicit the input of other individuals in an open forum, they should be kept to a minimum. If you struggle with time management and find that a majority of your day is spent in meetings, try to find other means of providing input to the attendees or host. It is possible that a meeting could have been avoided if the organizer had elicited the information from the individual stakeholders as opposed to trying to get everyone together at the same time. If you have ten people in a room and only require five minutes of each person's time, it is possible they may see it as you having burned 45 minutes of each person's time instead of effectively running a 50 minute meeting. Another mistake with meetings is that meeting organizers will often invite more people than required as a courtesy to certain individuals in management. Meetings with high profile stakeholders should be kept to a minimum and considered an alternative option if the result could have been obtained by other means.

5.4. Team Conflicts

Time management is not entirely within your own control as in the situation of a team conflict. When a conflict arises, this can severely impair the productivity of the team and at times, bring a project to a halt. Conflicts can be caused from different needs or interests, poor communication, lack of information, problems around control or responsibility, personality clashes, or even a lack of trust. An example of such a conflict

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could be a new person is hired into the company and their background and values are different than the existing values of the team. At some point these values may clash and this can result in a power struggle which divides the team members. Second guessing one manager's decision due to not having all the facts is another common cause for conflict. For instance if a security manager is working with the IT operations teams to have their systems patched, it is possible the director of operations may disagree with the need to apply the patches. The security manager may see the need to patch as critical to preventing an exploit while the director of operations only sees this as unnecessary downtime when rebooting the system. In order for both parties to resolve their differences they need to understand each other's perspective. It is important to identify the source of a conflict and to work to resolve it as opposed to ignoring it in the hopes that it goes away. Conflict is a natural part of business and life, so understanding how to identify it and work through the issues will keep you moving forward.

6. Managing your Time Effectively

Now that we've discussed activities and behaviors that lead to time wasted, let's talk about how to manage these activities or avoid them if at all possible. Some of the issues will be easily corrected with the proper motivation and reminders, while others will require the help of your team and peers. Establishing good communication techniques and ground rules upfront will make your time management that much easier to implement. It will also inform individuals of the best means to communicate with you and what to expect with regard to response times. Effective time management is not about being excessive with your scheduling techniques but rather to put some forethought into your planning and to ensure progress is being made.

6.1. Tackling Procrastination

Procrastination is a "time thief" that is feeds on distractions and people's inherent desire to find something better to do. Instead of focusing on the primary task, we let ourselves get caught up in phone calls, instant messaging, browsing the internet, or chatting with co-workers. The key to helping stay focused is to take these distractions out of the equation all together. Set your phone to "do-not-disturb", close you instant

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messaging program, and close all web pages that are not specifically being used to work on your project. If necessary, take yourself out of your environment where these distractions cannot bother you. Book a conference room, close your office door, disable your network connection, or telecommute from home to provide that undisturbed time to make some real progress. Get into a routine of having this undisturbed time blocked out and you will be amazed at the results of how much you can accomplish when you aren't stopping every five minutes to do something else.

6.2. Controlling Your Email Habits

Email is a great communication tool for logging formal discussions and enables information to be sent to multiple parties at the same time. The trouble is, people become so reliant on email that they will often use this medium to communicate with others literally sitting ten feet away. This informal use of emails tends to get a bit excessive and can often eat up more time than needed. It is important to recognize this, and to limit your use of email to only that which is truly needed to be documented or cannot be handled by other faster means.

In order to maximize your time spent working and minimize your time spent answering remedial emails, you should establish some blocks of time dedicated to reading them. This will be time when you go through all your emails and tie up any loose ends. Initially you may want to let your boss and team know what those blocks are and tell them that if it is truly important (fire drill) then they should call you. Otherwise set up a small widow in the middle of the day and one at the end of the day to go through any emails and focus on the most important ones first. It will also help if you disable the auto-notification or "pop-up" at the bottom right when new emails come in as this is just a distraction and adds to the procrastination problem. You may even find it necessary to turn off your email program so you are not tempted to flip between applications while working on your main project.

6.3. Control Your Meetings and Attendance

It is nearly impossible to conduct business without having meetings of some sort, but there should be some criteria established to justify the meeting. Meetings can be very expensive to the company based on the number of employees (resources) in attendance.

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Because of this, the host should ensure that having a meeting is absolutely necessary, and that each attendee is specifically chosen to serve a designated purpose. If you are the host of a meeting, know the purpose, have an agenda, ensure only absolutely required attendees are invited, and review the potential outcomes ahead of time. Focus on driving the meetings to completion by knowing what milestones or topics need to be addressed at which intervals. Allow enough time for ample discussion of each topic but if things are starting to get side-tracked, opt to take that issue offline with the specific parties in question. Reviewing the possible outcomes ahead of time will also help ensure you have invited the key stakeholders and subject matter experts. The key stakeholders will be required to make the executive decisions while the subject matter experts will be able to address the in-depth details of discussion.

If you are not the host of a meeting, then you should evaluate the necessity of your presence. If your input can be provided via phone or email prior to a meeting then this might be a better option. If a meeting has too many attendees and is scheduled for a long period of time, perhaps your responsibilities can be covered in a pre-meeting with less people or just your team. If the meeting will require your input during an open discussion, perhaps you can send a delegate from your team as opposed to yourself. This can also be rotated amongst team members so that time spent in meetings is evenly distributed. Effective time management, with regard to meetings, can be accomplished if you are being proactive. Work with the host to ensure you are doing all that you can to answer any questions prior to the meeting which may limit your time required or even excuse your presence altogether.

6.4. Conflict Resolution

Staying on track and continually moving forward often means having to resolve disputes as they arise. *"One of the keys to resolving a conflict can be knowing the other person's needs, interests, and fears, so you can take these into consideration in coming up with a resolution that works for you both. Then, too, recognizing and considering the importance of a particular issue to you and others can be a factor in helping you achieve mutually satisfying resolution*." (Scott, 2007, p.24) Managers must be sensitive to their team member's needs as well as taking into account the company's best interest. There

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will be times when one individual may have to sacrifice their needs to benefit the other person as well as times when both parties in a conflict will benefit from the decision made. Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann actually developed a conflict model (Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument) that identified five different styles of dealing with conflict.

The five styles are differentiated from one another based on the level of assertiveness the person has in wanting to satisfy their own needs compared to the level of willingness to compromise with the other person. Wanting only to satisfy your own needs without concern for the other person is considered *"confrontational"* or *"competitive."* Being assertive while taking the other person's concerns into account is working toward "*collaborative*" resolutions. Focusing only on satisfying the other person's needs without regard to your own needs is being *"accommodating."* Failing to address your own concerns or those of others is considered to be *"avoiding"* the issue. Balancing assertiveness for your own needs and those of others is a means of *"compromising."* (Scott, 2007) Knowing when to apply which style is important to working through an issue while minimizing the time spent dwelling on it. When a quick decision needs to be made and it is very important to the company, sometimes the confrontational style is necessary. On the other hand if the issue is relatively unimportant and can be delayed, the avoiding style could be applied. If the issue is unimportant and you want to ensure things keep progressing, the accommodating style would be a good fit. If an issue is important to both parties, and there is adequate time and resources, the collaborative approach may be the best bet. Finally, if both parties have different goals and an equal amount of influence, they can resolve the issue quickly by compromising. This would mean that both parties take some sort of sacrifice. The best option is the collaborative approach, but this option is not always available due to time and resource constraints. Understanding the root cause of the conflict will ultimately help to choose the best means of resolving the issue.

6.5. Prioritize Your Work

Any hard worker can always find tasks to stay busy but contributing to company's overall success requires forethought into what projects or tasks will be the most

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beneficial to the company. Ensuring that you and your team are focused on projects that will make the biggest difference for the company can only be achieved through proper prioritization. Document the list of company projects and team projects and incorporate these into your short and long term goals. Work with your team to divide up the tasks and establish rewards for achieving major milestones. Prioritizing these projects and establishing reward criteria will focus your team's effort on project deliverables and not just routine operations. Having a to-do list and prioritizing the essential tasks from non-essential tasks will help ensure continual progress is being made. In Alan Lakein's book *Time Management: How to Get Control of your Time and Life* he identifies the uses and misuses of the to-do list. He stresses that the list should be prioritized and the important stuff should always be done first. He also addressed the overall goal which was to live a "*happy, healthy, well-rounded life"* which meant staying focused on the bigger picture and including "*rest, recreation, and relationships as important components of the full life."*(Cook, 1998)

6.6. Effective Delegation

Great managers are those that can lead by example. We are inspired by leaders that are the first ones into battle and the last ones to leave. But for any business to grow, employees must be empowered to do their job and given the opportunity to perform on their own. Micro-managing a team is probably one of the worst things a manager can do and it severely affects a team's output as well. Treating a team like children will only force them to act in such a manner. Not only does this greatly hinder a manager's time but it reduces the team's accountability, decreases production, weakens morale, and reduces employee creativity. Management should learn to balance their leadership style between autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire. An autocratic leadership style means that the manager is the one who makes the decision regardless of the preferences of the team. This can be necessary when important decisions need to be made in a short period of time and the team cannot come to an agreement. A democratic style gathers the input of the team and makes decisions as a whole or the majority vote. A laissez-faire style is less structured and empowers the individual team members to make decisions on their own. This can be an effective means of motivating employees, increasing accountability, and building trust. Although this is a great leadership style to facilitate personal

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development and growth, not all employees are interested in be a leader and would therefore prefer a greater level of direction and support from their manager.

7. Focusing on the Big Picture

In order for managers to make effective use of their time, they need to stay focused on the "Big Picture." This means freeing themselves from the routine of daily operations and concentrating on future growth and development. *"No matter how hectic life gets, the most successful people in life have a big-picture view that helps them rise above the chaos and maintain their perspective. A big-picture view is your overriding vision, your belief, simply put, of the meaning of what your life is all about, of what you want it to be."* (Morgenstern, 2004, p.13) Having this "big picture" view on life is what keeps you on track, provides motivation, and influences your decisions on how you spend your time. (Morgenstern, 2004) Managers need to keep focused on the big picture which means having defined long term and short term goals and a means of measuring success rates. Keeping the team focused on the big picture also helps to improve morale and provides context or meaning to their daily struggles.

8. Conclusion

The ability to effectively manage your own time is a characteristic of a great leader. Organized leaders are able to prioritize their projects, map out their schedules well in advance, focus on forecasts, and ultimately achieve their long term goals. Having the ability to recognize distractions or "time thieves" like procrastination, excessive emails, and excessive meetings is another important trait of those looking to excel beyond the day-to-day operations. A manager's ultimate goal should be to stay focused "on" the business and not to get caught up "in" the business.

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