



The bad news is that time flies.
The good news is you're the pilot.
— *Michael Alshuler*

MOST LEADERS ARE on a continual quest for better time management. In this fast-paced world, you are asked to do more with less and in half the time. A typical week includes recruiting appointments, training sessions, marketing meetings, all as you balance compliance demands. Just when you swear there is just no more time ... boom! Another urgent project or task finds its way into your in-box. And the beat goes on.

So how can a leader get ahead and start managing the schedule instead of being managed by it? Let's start by looking at (and discarding) some time management myths.

Ditch These Time Management Myths

MYTH ONE: YOU CAN MANAGE TIME

One of the greatest myths is that you can manage time. How can that be? Time is. Time exists. The truth is that you can't manage time but you *can* manage yourself in relation to time. You are the pilot of your life and therefore in control of the 1,440 minutes in a day and the 525,600 minutes in a year. I recently saw an article titled "How to Have an Extra Hour a Day!" We all know that's not possible. With only a finite amount of time in a day, you need to look at effectively managing yourself in relation to that time.

MAKE YOUR TIME COUNT

*You can't manage time, says **DIANE M. RUEBLING**. What field leaders need to do is to manage themselves in relation to time. Stop trying to be busier than the next guy or buying the latest gadget. You will see productivity soar when you plan your activities so you accomplish mission-critical tasks.*

You may be always busy, but are you always working on matters that really deserve your attention?

MYTH TWO: FINDING THE RIGHT TIME MANAGEMENT TOOL WILL SOLVE YOUR TIME ISSUES

People spend hundreds of millions every year buying time management systems, PDAs, calendars and other tools to solve their time management issues. These tools can be of great assistance and do have an important role if used correctly. However, each one of these tools is marketed as a panacea that will take care of all of your time issues. That's a myth.

In fact, sometimes these tools can make things worse. PDA sales have increased by 32 percent this past year. Having your calendar, task list, e-mail and phone in one place can be very helpful. But people can become focused on catching every e-mail and phone message, on watching the stock market or their favorite sports team. At this point, the tool controls them. Their involvement with this time management tool actually dissipates time and deflects their focus from important tasks.

MYTH THREE: THE BUSIER YOU ARE, THE MORE YOU GET DONE

Heightened periods of intensity are necessary for managers and can be beneficial for setting up a can-do atmosphere of high achievement. However, some individuals get addicted to crisis management. It keeps their adrenaline going. They like projecting an image of being in demand, necessary or important. Leaders who believe this spend their time solving crises, accomplishing tasks and taking meetings, but not necessarily doing what is most important. They don't have systems in place or the personal discipline to make sure that they spend time on what is most important, not just urgent. Busy, especially frenetically busy, does not connote productivity.

MYTH FOUR: PLANNING TAKES MORE TIME

This is a convenient excuse for someone who doesn't like to plan. Research shows the opposite: *planning saves time*. Figuring out your most important tasks and activities and scheduling time blocks for them will help you be more productive and save you time in the long run.

Pareto's Principle (the 80/20 rule) says that 20 percent of your activities or tasks will produce 80 percent of your impact/productivity. Without planning, you could easily miss giving the necessary attention and time to your most important activities.

Plan to Accomplish Your Critical Activities

Okay, now that we have some of those unhelpful myths out of the way, let's rethink how you approach your daily activities.

CREATE A PLAN

One of my favorite sayings is that "you don't climb Mt. Everest by wandering around." And you won't be successful in your career or as a leader by wandering around. You need a plan, and it is best if it is a concise plan.

Too many leaders have business plans that are huge exercises in documentation. These plans end up collecting dust on a shelf and are pulled out only at year's end, when it is time to write another plan. What will really help you in your year's journey is a document that clearly states what your vision, mission, strategies, measurable objectives and projects are. This can be done in one page. The more concise you are, the more clear you will be. Preparing this kind of plan will increase your ability to focus yourself and your time on what matters most.

DEFINE YOUR CRITICAL TASKS

You may be always busy, but are you always working on matters that really deserve your attention? There is an exercise where someone is asked to put big rocks, pebbles, sand and water in a vase. It doesn't take long to figure out that if you don't put the big rocks in first, the vase will fill up with pebbles, sand and water. There will be no room for the big rocks. You can perform the same exercise with your day, especially as work tends to expand to fill the time available. What are your big rocks (critical tasks), pebbles (important tasks), sand (less important tasks) and water (activities of questionable value). Figure out what your critical tasks are and then allocate blocks of time to devote to them.

One of the best ways for leaders to ensure that they are allotting time for their critical tasks is to develop a model week. Imagine an audit of your calendar and your most important objectives. Would the results reflect an alignment of the two? If not, is it any wonder that you feel that, despite hours and hours at the office, that you are not accomplishing what you need to?

You may need to track your time for a week or two before you develop your model week. As you review the results, you will begin to see how easy it is to be swallowed up in less important tasks, leaving less focus, capacity and energy for your most important tasks.

In addition to helping you achieve your mission-critical goals, making better use of your time can have personal benefits as well. Most leaders will tell you that they value work-life balance. By building a model week, they can accomplish their most important work objectives *and* have family, exercise or vacation time. One senior vice president I know is excellent at this. He starts his days very early, especially on Thursdays, so he can leave early to go to his daughter's soccer games. He also has a date night with his wife once every two weeks. Once these items were scheduled, they happened. If you're waiting for the *right* day to get up early to work out or to leave early for a child's game, it will be hit or miss.

DETERMINE WHAT ACTIVITIES ACCOMPLISH THE CRITICAL TASKS

I know a manager who said she never had time to accomplish her recruiting activities. One of my favorite leadership principles is —

$$\text{Results} = \text{Activity} \times \text{Effectiveness}$$

If you never do the activity in the first place, your effectiveness at it doesn't matter and you'll never get the results that you want. For this manager to accomplish her critical task, she needed to allot time each week to that activity.

One of the things that helped this manager was the model week just mentioned. A great way to confirm that you have an ideal model week is to check whether you have blocked time for the critical, high-payoff activities throughout your week. To execute these activities most effectively, these times should occur when you have the highest energy and focus. Also allow buffer time between appointments to recalibrate and to accommodate the unexpected.

Manage Your Environment

Now that you have redefined your relationship to time, let's look at your environment to ensure that it is structured to support you.

COMMUNICATE YOUR PRIORITIES

Your new approach to managing your critical tasks won't work unless you communicate it to your staff and associates. You need to ask for their support in carrying out your plan and model week. The trap that many leaders fall into is being distracted by the flavor of the month, the fire of the day or something that looks easier or is more appealing than tackling the critical tasks. Develop your team's ability to prioritize effectively and to respect the focus you have outlined. Don't forget that your assistant will be your biggest ally in your quest to manage yourself in relation to time.

BE ACCESSIBLE — ON YOUR TERMS

Many leaders view their role as being available and accessible to everyone, especially if there is a crisis or need. Bona-fide, drop-everything crises do occur, but often what people call a crisis is a problem that needs attention, but not immediately. Sometimes the problem doesn't even need *your* attention.

How many times do you hear "Do you have a minute?" or "Can I ask a quick question?" Figure out how you want to consistently respond to these time traps in a way that is supportive and yet allows you to stay on track and focused.

Every day should have a block of time to deal with issues that come up unexpectedly or to be available to people in your organization. For instance, you could say, "Let's talk at 3:30. We can discuss it then." Frequently, the problem is resolved by the time you were supposed to meet.

Scheduling one-on-one meetings with your direct reports is a good way to avoid impromptu interruptions and requests, especially if you use an agenda. When he or she adds an item to the agenda, your subordinate has to think about whether it deserves your time and attention. Like planning, these meetings will save you time in the long run and make your organization more productive.

SCHEDULE BRIEF MEETINGS WITH PLANNED AGENDAS

Meetings can be necessary and productive, but you have to manage them too, or they can be a huge time trap. Some organizations get caught up in having meetings for everything. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith once

KEY STRATEGIES

Make Your Time Count

» **YOU** can't manage time; you *can* manage yourself in relation to time.
 » **MANAGE** your schedule and activities to accomplish your critical tasks.
 » **START** with planning. How else will you know what tasks are critical to accomplishing your goals?

» **YOUR** model week should include blocks of time devoted to the activities necessary to accomplish your critical tasks. If you're not performing the activity, how can you hope to win?
 » **COMMUNICATE** your priorities to staff and associates. Be accessible, but within boundaries.

» **USE** power meetings, agendas and facilitators to enjoy useful, focused and *short* meetings.
 » **MAKE** a conscious decision to change your time management habits and commit to it.

quipped, "Meetings are indispensable when you don't want to do anything." To make sure that doesn't happen, conduct meetings with clear agendas and defined outcomes. Create the expectation that participants will come to meetings prepared. Have someone facilitate so that you stay on the agenda. Pursuing tangents ends up lengthening the meeting and decreasing everyone's focus.

A popular concept is to have short power or stand-up meetings. For instance, to make sure that everyone is focused on the right activities for the day, have a 10-minute stand-up meeting each morning. When standing, people will get to the point and be more focused, more so than when they settle into their chair at the conference table with a cup of coffee. Another time enhancer is to have meetings at the end of the day or right before lunch. People will be more likely to press for results, knowing they have other commitments.

Leap Forward

So what will your new week look like? Well, your day will still be filled with activity. However, instead of feeling frustrated that you're never getting to the big stuff or that you haven't had the chance to have the impact that you want, you'll feel calmer and be more effective. You'll be spending your time where it really counts: on the activities that you know will bring you the biggest return. You'll still be available to staff and associates, but within boundaries. The planning that you have done — from the macro strategic level to the micro meeting level — allows everyone to focus on what is important, not just on what flew in the door that day.

The final step for making this vision come true is to commit to change and believe in your power to change. Without those two things, in fact, none of these ideas or suggestions will work. The road to fully unleashing the power to succeed starts with your personal commitment.

As you attempt to change how you and your organization plan and schedule activities, don't become frustrated. Remember that leadership is what you do for a living. Make some decisions about managing yourself in relation to time, commit to them and leap forward to your new reality. ❖

»**Diane M. Ruebling** is president of The Ruebling Group LLC, a consulting firm that provides executive coaching, action learning team facilitation, business planning and performance systems (www.rueblinggroup.com). Her successful financial services leadership background and professional training make her consulting relevant and results oriented. Prior to starting her own company, Diane held leadership roles in various financial services companies, including national field vice president for the MONY Group and group vice president for American Express Financial Advisors.

Diane can be reached at 480-248-6149 (Arizona office), 218-682-2027 (Minnesota office) or via e-mail at diane@rueblinggroup.com.



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