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Time Matters

American poet Carl Sandberg said, "Time is the coin of your life. It is the only coin you have, and only you can determine how it will be spent. Be careful lest you let other people spend it for you." Control your time and you control your life. Yet many people are not in control of their time. The topic is hugely popular; my Internet search on "time management" returned more than 63 million hits. One blogger opined that spending less time reading about time management would free up enough time to handle everything!

Since time is valuable, I'll be brief and succinctly present my top five time management secrets. I chose these five based on my interactions with managers, from CEOs to project managers, and picked tips that are proven to work and easy to carry out. Moreover, I excluded some fundamental time management techniques (like setting aside blocks of time to handle emails and return calls) which most managers already use, so the following doesn't cover all the basics.

1. **Plan on a weekly basis.** Define specific and measurable goals on a weekly basis. Include completion dates. Notice the focus on goals rather than activities. If the goal is clear, the activities necessary to reach that goal are usually obvious. Weekly planning gives a practical perspective and helps you envision more options than just daily planning. Also, set priorities for the goals, using an A, B, and C scale. "A" priorities are the most important and must be achieved. "C" goals are desirable, but can be delayed if necessary to meet A and B priorities. Then schedule the various goals to specific days of the week. For most people, Friday afternoon is the best time to prepare a plan for the next week.
2. **Expect the unexpected.** Include time for unanticipated events in each day's schedule. At least mentally, consider a Plan B. You *know* everything will not go according to plan, so build in some flexibility. Get into the habit of asking yourself "what if" questions. Even if the answers are not satisfying or satisfactory, the fact that you have considered contingencies in advance prepares you to better handle the unexpected.
3. **Synchronize daily.** Begin each day with a short scheduling session. Reset priorities, if necessary, and then sequence activities (1, 2, 3, etc.) within each of

the A, B, and C priority groups. Also, hold a brief team huddle and/or “Bullet Point” review with your boss, as appropriate. The Bullet Point review covers critical activities and responsibilities for that day, and is designed to ensure synchronization of priorities. Both team huddles and Bullet Point reviews should be carried out standing up.

4. **Stay focused.** Always be able to complete the following two statements.

- The single most important thing we must do this week is _____.
- If we do nothing else today, we must _____.

Avoid the tyranny of the urgent.

5. **Manage interruptions.** Interruptions are a part of business life, so the first step is to accept they’re going to happen. Adjust your mental attitude so that you are less aggravated by interruptions, and then try some of the following.

- Stand up if a person drops by
- Suggest an alternate time or communication method (voice mail, email, etc)
- Schedule regular meetings with the people you frequently interact with, and then ask when interrupted, “Can this wait until our next meeting?”
- Get right back to work – don’t use the interruption as an excuse to wander off task

How you spend your time reflects your priorities, and effective time management is an essential leadership skill. Finally, know that scheduling is the key to making things happen. Goals are more likely to be met when you set an unambiguous deadline. Think about it: If deadlines were not important, they wouldn’t begin with dead!

Tom Wagner

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