

Five Keys to Successful Time Management

Bobby L. Butler

Although a simple concept, time management, the ability to manage one's time, is for many of us a most desired yet elusive skill. As such, regardless of how successful, effective or efficient we are, there's always room for improvement.

Perhaps William Penn said it best: "Time is what we want most, but what we use worst." Also, Will Rogers said, "Half our life is spent trying to find something to do with the time we have rushed through life trying to save."

The subject matter on time management is almost endless. I can't possibly tell you in 30 minutes everything you may want to or should know about it. Instead today, I'd like to share with you five keys to successful time management.

The First Key is to Organize and Divide

Without organization, there is only chaos; it is the foundation for control. Read any of my writing on time management, and you'll quickly come to understand how important control is in the execution of time management practice. Also, you'll learn the premise upon which I base all of my teaching on time management: "When it comes to time management, if you are not in control of your time then, simply put, someone or something else is in control of you."

Good time management practice starts and ends with organization. Proper organization will put you in control of not only how you manage your time, but ultimately, your level of success. It will help you manage work-flow, and position you to know exactly where you are at all times as it relates to the day's work.

Today I'd like to share one key strategy for getting organized: "divide and conquer." Our tasks and responsibilities are often voluminous and quite complicated, and thus, it can be very difficult to get them handled all at once. We often find ourselves so out-manned, out-gunned and overwhelmed, that we fail to get things done at all, let alone on time. We stand a much better chance of accomplishing objectives by taking our tasks and, where possible, dividing them into workable parts.

To do this effectively, you'll want to first identify the functional parts of each task. Next, prioritize the parts in order of importance to both its task and, perhaps more importantly, the completion of the task overall. Then identify the associative relationship between parts. Where appropriate, work these through together. Next, assign realistic timeframes into workable segments. And finally, go to work and get things done. As Lee Iacocca said, "If you want to make good use of your time, you've got to know what's most important and then give it all you've got."

The Second Key to Successful Time Management is to Work with Purpose

This may be common sense, but there are a number of us who go about doing things daily without real purpose. And, many who begin the day with a purpose in mind don't, as a result of "the heat of the battle," end the day with that purpose intact.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines purpose as, “an aim or goal.” Additionally, it says that purpose is, “a result or effect that is intended or desired.” And finally, it says that to have purpose is, “to intend or resolve to perform or accomplish.”

Just as there can only be chaos without organization, without purpose, there is no rhyme or reason for what we do, how we do it or when the infamous “it” is to be done. Therefore, achievement—whether simply aspired to or pursued with great vigor—absent purpose is generally suspect, and may very well be devoid of reality.

That said, there are three key strategies for making purpose central to not only what you do, and how or when it’s done, but also why. They are: 1) have a plan of action, 2) apply the appropriate focus and 3) keep the end gain in mind.

Again in the interest of time, I won’t go into great detail today regarding these strategies. Rather, I’ll conclude this part of my presentation by highlighting the functional role that each strategy plays in the establishment and promotion of a purpose-driven day.

Your plan of action—whether daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly or annual—is essentially your road map to success. It’s preferably a written document that outlines your purpose: what you’re going to do, when you’re going to do it, how you’ll get it done, and why it’s important to you in the first place. Additionally, focus, or the ability to get on course and stay there, is imperative to the successful completion of objectives. So when you apply the appropriate level of focus to your daily activities, distinctive clear purpose will become the rule rather than exception. Finally, by keeping the end gain in mind, regardless of the obstacles faced, you won’t allow impediments of any kind to overshadow what you want to achieve. More importantly, your motivation won’t wane, provided you “keep your eye on the prize.”

The Third Key to Successful Time Management is to Deal with Procrastination

Let's first define procrastination. The American Heritage Dictionary says that to procrastinate is "to put off doing something, especially out of habitual carelessness or laziness."

Brian Tracy describes time as "your greatest resource" and Dennis Waitley states that it's "the most precious element of human existence." If you concur with these two personal development icons, you must also appreciate just how wasteful a thing procrastination is, whether it's simply the waste of opportunity or it involves the waste of an exhaustible resource such as time.

Alan Lakein, the inventor of time management, and author of *How to Get In Control of Your Time and Your Life* said, "Time equals life; therefore, waste your time and waste your life, or master your time and master your life." M. Scott Peck, the author of *The Road Less Traveled* also said, "Until you value yourself you will not value your time. Until you value your time, you will not do anything with it."

Given how procrastination only serves to squander valuable assets, doesn't it stand to reason that to be in control of time, work, and even life itself, the procrastinating habits we all have must be dealt with?

Here's one strategy for dealing with this problem: "don't put off to tomorrow what you can do today." Wow, break through, ha?

Okay! I know that you've heard this, and have no doubt said it yourself, many times before. So there's nothing magical here, or is there? Perhaps there is!

You see, procrastination is a habit. And as any habit, it can be broken or changed. It's certainly not easy, but is very doable.

Everything that I've read and/or studied about habits is that they are learned. So they can also be un-learned. Here's my suggestion for dealing with bad habits: Like "divide and conquer," I recommend that you deal with your procrastination in small chunks. That is, don't try changing every unproductive thing you do right away. Rather, deal with each of them one step at a time. Only once you've successfully conquered one bad habit should you focus your attention on another.

The Fourth Key to Successful Time Management is to Work Flexibly

Perhaps I should clarify here. By saying that we must employ flexibility, I am not advocating change for change's sake. Rather, what I am saying is that in addition to being organized, on purpose and free of procrastination, we also need to allow for the things we can't control and how they impact us.

I'm sure that everyone here has heard of Murphy's Law; which is of course, "anything that can go wrong, will." I'd be surprised if there were any of us who have not experienced its realities. Therefore, the wisest thing we can do when it comes to managing our time is to ensure that our desire to control what we do, and when it gets done, is not so rigid that we make matters worst rather than better.

As with most things in life, it's not good to be on the extreme end of time management practices. Rather, it is as ineffective to be overly stringent with time management as it is to be as "loose as a goose" about it. Thus, too much control can be as unproductive as no control.

My best advice is to purposely build flexibility into your scheduling methodology. When allocating time to handle your respective tasks, set your schedule with realistic

rather than tight timeframes. Also, build some additional time in your schedule to allow for the unexpected. Understand that no matter what you do to get a better handle on how you manage your time, problems will still arise. When they do, apply your *time management engagement strategy*.

What's this you ask? Well, it's a systematically based methodology that allows you to quickly size up problems and determine what needs to be done, when the problems need to be handled, and who else, if anyone, should take care of them.

The Fifth and Final Key to Successful Time Management is to Manage Stress

In addition to rendering us ineffective, inefficient and unproductive, stress can make us ill. Left unchecked, it may very well "put us out of our misery." No doubt then, getting in control of our stressors is, in a word, imperative.

There are of course, numerous ways to handle stress. Depending upon preference however, some are better suited to some of us than others. As with the previous four keys, I cannot possibly cover today everything that we could or should do to manage stress therefore, permit me to simply mention a few things.

To begin, implement the four keys previously discussed. Next, expand both your understanding and the practice of time management beyond what's been presented today.

Don't attempt doing everything yourself. Instead, involve people you know and can trust to handle things. Delegation, indeed, can be a wondrous thing.

Finally, relax. There's really very little in life that is so critical that the world in general, or our world specifically, will fall apart should we not get everything done. That

said, don't, as the old saying goes, "make mountains out of molehills." In my opinion, life is really too short. We should do all that we can to extend rather than end it.

Here are some practical forms of relaxation that work for me; perhaps you'll find them useful as well:

First, when I feel the stress coming on, I pause for a moment, take a couple of deep breaths, and recall that for me to be my most effective, I must remain calm, composed and constructive. This refresher is most effective for me.

Second, I listen to relaxing, but upbeat music. I have satellite radio in my office, and one of the platforms played is "Euro" music. It's upbeat and non-intrusive; I can turn it on and let it play in background all day and not be distracted or disturbed. It works great for me.

Finally for me, exercise is a godsend. Not matter how I'm being stressed, I find it to be a great reliever, whether it's one of the old-school standbys—calisthenics, weight-lifting or aerobics—or the new wave in exercise and relaxation—Yoga.

Closing

John Kennedy said, "We must use time as a tool, not a crutch." Also, there is a Proverb that states, "Lost time is never found again." And finally, Francis Bacon said, "To choose time is to save time."

Perhaps today I've accomplished two things in being with you. First, I've either brought to you attention or reminded you of just how precious time is for all of us, and second, I've given you a few good ideas on ways to become more effective managers of

time. If so, then I've accomplished what I wanted to, and together, we've made good use of our time today.

I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. I'll take your questions now.

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