

Vitality

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Improving Time Management Skills

Being busy and being effective are not the same thing. Being busy is spending your day bouncing from one activity to another and achieving very little. Being effective is using your time wisely so you work smarter and get more done in less time. Great time management skills can make the difference between coping and excelling.

In today's 24/7, global economy, staying on top of shifting deadlines, changing client and management demands, and ever-increasing workloads is a constant challenge. Add to these the frequent disruptions everyone encounters on a daily basis – inefficient processes, email, phone calls, texts, instant messaging, meetings, and co-worker questions – and it's a wonder you and your team ever get anything done.

It doesn't matter what our job is, whether we're senior executives or just beginning our careers, we all share one thing in common – a lack of time. Improving time management skills for everyone on your team – including yourself – is the key to improving productivity and engagement.



What is time management?

The most productive people manage their time exceptionally well because they focus on results, not activities. By doing so they¹:

- Meet deadlines
- Produce quality work
- Have excellent professional reputations
- Have better work-life balance
- Experience less stress

There are many ways to improve individual and collective time management skills, but one of the most effective is by applying the 80/20 principle.

The 80/20 principle

The 80/20 principle states that the relationship between output and input is unequal². In other words, you achieve approximately 80% of your results with just 20% of your efforts. You spend the rest of your time on those disruptions – the meetings, emails, phone calls, etc. The key to increasing your effectiveness is to focus more on the 20% of your duties that actually produce results³. These are likely to be complex, demanding, time-consuming tasks, but they are what should be at the top of your daily to-do list. The rest of your responsibilities should take a lower priority.

Making a list

Time management begins with planning. Take some time each morning to make a list of tasks that require your immediate attention⁴. Use the 80/20 rule – prioritize jobs that move your department forward. The advantages of a to-do list are many⁵. They:

- Keep you focused on your objectives
- Help you remember even the smallest task
- Help you prioritize what is more important or urgent
- Show the bigger picture
- Save time
- Keep you in control and on track
- Create a record of what you've done and when

- Provide a sense of achievement as you cross off completed tasks

When it comes to managers, they are responsible for organizing their time and they also need to be aware of how each member of their team is utilizing his or her time. This is no easy feat when everyone has different strengths and weakness, as well as different ways of working and communicating. Creating one cohesive, highly productive team can take a while, but the first step involves making sure everyone improves their time management skills. And that process begins at the top – with you.

Personal time management

Great time management skills are essential for everyone – but especially for managers who juggle the business priorities of senior management with the needs of their clients and teams.

Here are some ways you can begin making the most efficient use of your limited time.

- **Don't multitask⁹:** In order to get the most out of our time, we feel the need to do several things at once, but we actually accomplish more when we focus on one thing at a time. Multitasking actually hampers productivity because it takes much longer to finish anything.
- **Learn to say no¹⁰:** Politely decline to take on more work if you're feeling overloaded or overwhelmed. Consult your to-do list to see if a new job will interfere with your ability to complete existing priority work and meet deadlines.
- **Set deadlines¹¹.** Set realistic deadlines and make sure you stick to them.
- **Take breaks¹²:** Your body needs regular breaks to prevent eye or muscle strain, headaches and leg cramps, and your mind needs short breaks to rest and refresh. Try not to eat lunch at your desk. You will be far more focused, creative, and able to cope with stressful situations when you allow yourself to take regular, short breaks.

Team time management

The key to getting a dispersed group to work together and deliver projects on deadline is time management. As manager, you play a key role in ensuring your team uses available time effectively, and there are a few ways you can do this.

- **Delegate intelligently¹³.** Every member of your team has his or her own unique strengths and weaknesses. Some may have abilities you lack and some may need to develop certain skills. Take advantage of experienced, highly skilled team members and help those who may need to develop their talents. Smart

delegation will not only free up your time but it will also help your employees develop.

- **Communicate clearly¹⁴.** Clear communication involves careful listening, reading, speaking, and writing to interpret and convey information. A staff member coming back for further explanation of a task, who spends the morning trying to figure things out, or does the job incorrectly because of poor instructions is just wasting valuable time.
- **Review processes¹⁵.** Hunting for information, finding the right person to help with an issue, being invited to meetings that do not affect your department, and

Organizing your time

Managers tend to be pulled in several directions at once, and meetings and phone calls can consume an entire day and leave little time for priorities. Use your online calendar to take control, as much as you are able, of your time. For example:

Schedule meetings in blocks⁶.

Meetings reduce the time you have for your own work to small segments interspersed throughout the day. They also invariably go over schedule, reducing your time to focus on larger projects. Schedule all your meeting in blocks so that one begins right after another. This helps meetings to start and end on time and leaves the rest of day free for important tasks. Don't allow latecomers to stall proceedings. If someone is late, stay with the agenda and do not recap the last 10 or 20 minutes for their benefit. They'll soon start being on time.

Schedule specific times to return calls each day⁷.

If you have administrative support, have him or her tell callers when to expect a return call from you. This way you won't be constantly interrupted with phone calls that are not urgent and you can focus on your work. If you don't have an administrative assistant, use your voice mail to say you will return calls at a certain time, or by the end of the business day.

Schedule quiet time⁸.

You need time to focus on your priority tasks and yet you want to have an open door policy for your staff. The trick is to find the balance. Let your staff know that when your door is closed it is because you are working on something that requires your full concentration and you would appreciate not being interrupted, unless the matter is urgent. Let these same people know that when your door is open they are most welcome to bring questions and concerns to you. Your staff will understand that you also have assigned tasks to accomplish and deadlines to meet.

having lengthy approval processes waste everyone's time. Meet with staff to find out where they think time is being wasted and where processes can be improved.

- **Set deadlines or goals.** When delegating tasks, set realistic deadlines and goals. Ask employees what other work they have and what needs to be done first. Be flexible to changing priorities. Employees who consistently fail to meet realistic, agreed to deadlines and/or goals may need help improving their time management skills¹⁶.
- **Use technology¹⁷.** Software is available that can help manage and/or track projects. Find a system that works for you and your team, and stick to it. Changing systems too often confuses people and wastes time with everyone learning new software. Using online tracking will help you see the big picture, the status of each project, and where your intervention may be needed.
- **Be a role model.** Some employees find it easy to meet multiple deadlines and can effectively project manage their own workloads – Others may struggle. As manager, you need to be the example of great time management skills, rarely missing deadlines, and always producing first-class work – all while juggling meetings, emails, phone calls, and other tasks. It will be hard to get employee buy-in for improving time management skills if your own are not exceptional.
- **Provide training.** Make time management workshops, webinars, and seminars available for staff, and encourage participation. Make sure you attend these training opportunities with your staff as this will demonstrate the importance you place on time management.

CONCLUSION

There are many talents, abilities, and personality traits that make a great team leader. Superior time management skills are perhaps one of the most important. A manager who is able to manage his or her own time, manage their team's time, and who gets things done without rushing and without placing unnecessary pressure on others will be effective. Managers who are able to accommodate changing deadlines and shifting priorities without unduly disrupting the work flow of the entire department will reap the rewards of a more productive, more engaged, less stressed, and happier team.

1. Mind Tools
2. Investopedia
3. About.com
4. Entrepreneur
5. University of Kent
6. Smart Manager

7. Smart Manager
8. Smart Manager
9. Lifehack
10. Lifehack
11. Lifehack
12. Lifehack

13. Smart Manager
14. Project Management Institute
15. Mind Tools
16. Houston Chronicle
17. Start Up Collective

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