About three years ago, I began studying and practicing time management techniques, after having served four years as department chair and having gone through the typical headaches that people in my job go through; always putting out fires while battling to meet another deadline, getting overwhelmed with the volume of work piling up, and struggling with pressures to take on more and more even though my instinct was telling me to say no. After adopting some simple strategies allowing me to take control of my time, I find that the job I do today is so much more effective and enjoyable than it was seven years ago, when I began my current leadership position. In this article I will share some key principles I have found to work well in my position and that I believe will work well for any academic leader. For more in-depth reading on the subject, I recommend some of the classic books on the subject, such as Douglas and Douglas (1980) or McKinsey (1990).

WHERE HAVE ALL THE HOURS GONE?

If you ever wondered what happened to all the time that you thought you had and why you never seem to have enough time, then I recommend that you take some simple steps to find out. My education is in statistics, and as an addict of data, I decided to study my use of time by collecting detailed data on how I spent my time over an initial period of six months. My data collection was very detailed, recording the time I spent (rounded to the nearest 15 minutes) on every activity I did throughout the day. My study (Hansen, 2007) was useful for research purposes; however, I do not recommend such an approach for everyone. For most academic leaders, recording a time log limited to work-related tasks for a period of one or two weeks will suffice as an initial assessment. If your reaction to doing this is that you “do not have enough time,” then trust me, the benefits of learning how you are spending your time, and most likely wasting a large portion of it, will pay you back in multiples of the time invested in this exercise. In fact, some of the payback may happen instantaneously, due to the fact that you tend to work more effectively when being held accountable for your time (even if you do not plan to share these results with anyone else). The time log can be recorded using a notepad and a pen, but an electronic spreadsheet may be more effective if you have a computer easily accessible through most of your day. Leave room in the right margin for comments. At the end of the day, review your time log and write yourself some notes in the margin on each activity you did during the day. Consider the benefits of each activity and how you might have gone about achieving the same results more effectively, for instance, could some of these activities have been
delegated to others? Did you end up duplicating some efforts due to not having adequate information at the time, perhaps due to lack of personal organization?

One goal of the time log exercise is to draw a profile of your daily or weekly consumption of time on various types of tasks/activities. Once you have completed your time log for your initial period, you will need to do some simple statistical analyses on it (you do not have to be a statistician to do this) by grouping tasks appropriately into categories that describe the jobs you do and tallying up the hours spent on each. For a department chair, such categories may include advising, committee work, answering phone and email messages, teaching, etc. I recommend that a category that takes up a large portion of your time be defined so that it relates to a specific purpose. For instance, defining a category like “meetings” that may take up 25 percent of your overall time is not useful in understanding how your time is being spent. If the meetings you are attending have purposes, then there should be categories defined in accordance with these purposes.

MAKE A PLAN AND STICK TO IT

After reviewing your time profile, you will likely realize that there were important tasks that you did not get done during the period, because you did not spend enough time on the associated category, whereas there were categories where many hours were spent without measurable achievements. If that is true, consider how much time you should have spent on each category. I refer to this exercise as creating a time budget. In writing your time budget, for, say, an upcoming week or month, you will need to first decide how many work hours are available collectively during the period. Many people in leadership positions feel that in order to do an effective job, it is a fact that they have to put in much more time than the average person, perhaps as many as 70 to 80 hours per week. The myth that being a workaholic is a characteristic of good leadership has been disputed in the literature (McKinsey, 1990). Most jobs can and should be done within a 40-hour workweek if effective time management principles are being applied. Furthermore, research shows that productivity often drops sharply during the extra hours spent on the job. Split your budgeted hours among your categories, and use that as a plan for how you intend to spend your next week at work. I recommend keeping score of how many hours you actually spend. I have developed an Excel spreadsheet specifically for that purpose, but it can be done in a less formal fashion.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

There will always be more tasks on your “to-do list” than you will have time to do. For tips on managing your “to-do list,” see Gmelch (2004), Crandell (2005), and Hansen (2007). One of the key principles of time management is to prioritize tasks on the basis of the following criteria:

- Importance
- Urgency
Tasks should be considered important either because there is a high payoff from doing them or, conversely, a negative consequence from not doing them. The literature suggests that “importance” should outweigh “urgency” (e.g., Covey, 1990), although our natural tendency is to favor urgent tasks regardless of their importance. The “effort needed” is another important factor. It makes sense to do some routine tasks that don’t require a lot of effort even if they do not measure the highest overall in terms of importance and urgency. Ultimately, however, the payoff from any task should be proportionate to the needed effort required.

I personally use a scoring system each morning when I review my “to-do list.” Tasks are scored on a scale from 1 to 5 in terms of importance and urgency. I focus on the items that score high on importance (4 or 5) and consider urgency as a criterion only among those. Routine tasks are usually managed separately from this list. Each day, I block out times to handle tasks such as checking and responding to email, returning phone calls, and typing or dictating simple memos.

Other factors in time management include items often discussed under the heading of eliminating or reducing “time wasters.” See, for example, Bond (1991) and McKinsey (1990):

- Doing fewer things at once
- Delegating more tasks to others
- Learning when and how to say no
- Reducing procrastination
- Getting organized

In a nutshell, a time waster is anything that prevents you from making effective use of your time. Doing “fewer things at once” means focusing on fewer things and avoiding unnecessary interruptions. Having phone calls screened by an office assistant, checking emails during limited blocks of time, setting appropriate office hours, and scheduling “quiet times” to work uninterrupted on projects are some of the techniques I apply in order to stay focused on tasks. Being able to effectively delegate tasks to others requires both resources and experience. If indeed you are seriously lacking resources such as office staff and you end up spending much of your time doing routine work that should have been delegated, I recommend focusing some of your efforts on convincing your superiors that you need those resources. Learning to say no is an integral part of effectively prioritizing tasks based on importance and urgency. Often we find ourselves saying yes, simply because we feel pressured to do so. We then overcommit ourselves and end up failing to follow through on our commitments or failing to get other more important
tasks done. Procrastinating means that we are failing to deal with unpleasant tasks in a timely manner. It takes a significant amount of discipline to overcome habits of procrastination. Acknowledging situations in which you are procrastinating, however, is the first step toward “kicking the habit.” Finally, getting organized takes time but has substantial payoff in terms of the overall efficiency in your use of time. Creating an effective filing system, eliminating the clutter on your desk and shelves, and maintaining a system for managing your tasks and projects will significantly save you time in the long run.

**TIME MANAGEMENT—AN EFFECTIVE TOOL OR A LIFESTYLE?**

All leaders will benefit from implementing time management techniques and continuing to identify areas in which improvements can be made. The reward for doing so is getting the important jobs done in a timely fashion without having to sacrifice your personal time by putting in endless extra hours on evenings and weekends.

**REFERENCES**


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