

TIME MANAGEMENT

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Everyone gets the same twenty-four hours each day, yet some people accomplish many times more than what might be considered normal. Surprisingly, these people often appear calm and unhurried. Without driving themselves, they have mastered the art of managing their most valuable resource, their time. They have arrived at constructive attitudes and have polished skills for making the most of their time. This session includes a discussion of the psychology and the techniques of time management.

The Psychology of Time Management

It is one thing to learn a technique and apply it diligently. It is quite another to understand why a technique works and be able to apply it creatively. This presentation offers a couple of techniques for making better use of time but first it covers why these techniques work. Unfortunately, our minds invite misunderstandings about time that interfere with our making the best use of our time. This discussion of the psychology of time management is intended to clarify these misunderstandings and prepare us to become the masters of our time.

Doing Everything We Have the Chance to Do

People develop their first notions of time early in life when there is relatively little that they can do. It is natural for parents to restrain young children to protect them from getting into things that would be dangerous and this, of course, restricts the number of things they can do. As young children begin to learn about minutes, hours and days, time seems long. And, time seems sufficient to do all the things that they are allowed and able to do. It is not at all unusual for youngsters to want to do more things and for parents to keep restraining them.

Increasing Pressure on Time

Having enough time to do everything that we have a chance to do continues through childhood for most children. However, the number of things that we are able to do and allowed to do steadily increases. The amount of time that we have for doing things does not increase. The twenty-four hours, that was ample for doing everything for the youngster, never gets any longer. By the time young people reach early adolescence most of them begin to find that they want to do more things than they have time to do.

For instance, in elementary school all of the children take the same subjects. When they leave the class room for recess in the school yard they are all apt to play the same games. Then when they reach junior high school they find that there are more classes than anyone is able to take. Perhaps they will choose between a trade program or a college preparatory program. Will they take a language? Which language will it be? They can't take both art and music. Which will it be?. After school, in the afternoons there are other choices. Will they get involved in school clubs? Will they try out for sports? Will they hang around - with who, - where - smoke pot - get involved in church activities? They are faced with many decisions. How they face these decisions determines their success with the identity crisis of adolescence.

The key to this identity crisis is the decision making. However, facing up to the idea that we can't do everything is uncomfortable and some people have a lot of trouble with it. As time marches on they do not decide. They promise themselves that someday they will do this and do that and go to all the different places, etc. Rather than making up their minds they waste their time while they carry psychological baggage that includes all of the things they will get around to someday.

This is a much greater problem as we approach the twenty-first century than it was for people in prior generations because there are so many things available for us to do today that were not available then. Television was not available when our grandparents were children and is now available in so many channels that the impossibility of watching them all is obvious. And, television is just a part of the vast array of entertainment that is available. Magazines and books are available on almost every subject. Everywhere we turn there are people telling us we should get involved in this exercise program or join this time sharing program, attend this professional meeting, get involved in these "do-it-yourself" projects, or another hobby, some totally worthwhile cause needs our involvement, and on it goes. No population has ever been so barraged with enticements to do so many things as we are today.

And, still there are people trying to do it all. They subscribe to magazines that they do not read and then when the renewal notice arrives they sign up again. Heaven forbid that they would miss an issue that they will stack up and not read!

At the heart of this issue of increasing pressure on time is the obvious need to make choices. But, this is only a part of the fascinating subject of mastering our time. Next we will deal with the elasticity of time.

Elasticity of Time

Scientists and engineers have gone to great lengths to provide us with instruments that measure time with extreme precision. Every minute is exactly the same as every other minute. However, as we experience time the minutes are not all the same. Some minutes seem to take forever and some seem to flash by. The key to understanding the elasticity of time is interest. The more interested we are in what is happening, the faster time seems to pass. Conversely, the more disinterested we are, the more time seems to drag.

Most people have personally experienced this relationship between interest and the passage of time. They know what it is like to be doing something that has them so involved that they are suddenly shocked at what time it has gotten to be. They also know how frustrating it is to wait, to stand in line doing nothing. In fact, they know the irritation they experience when someone cuts into the line. Waiting can seem to take so long that it tries our patience. Then when someone adds to the wait, patience may run out. More than one person has flown off the handle in this situation.

Most people also know what it is like to be sitting in an audience listening to something that is totally boring. How long it seems to take. "Will this never end?" Meanwhile, someone else in that same audience may be very interested in the subject. The person who is interested may wish the speaker would slow down and repeat something again and if he does, the person who is bored will be thinking, "Oh no! He saying it again! He's said that three times already and I wasn't interested in the first place." Suffice it to say that all minutes are the same amount of time but the same minute may seem totally different to two different people depending on their interest.

Selective Memory

The elasticity of time would be of little interest to the subject of time management except that it is directly related to memory. Memory in turn sets the stage for the time trap that steals our time. Here is how that works.

The less involved we are with any given activity the slower the time seems to pass. Ironically, the slower the time passes, the less we will remember it. The more bored we become, the less energy we give to the task and the less brain work we do building the linkages that will enable us to get back to that experience again.

Conversely, the more involved we are with any experience the more energy we expend on the brain work that enables us to relive that experience over and over again and many years later at that. For instance, most people can remember small details about particular experiences such as a graduation day, a wedding day, the birth of a child, attending a super bowl game, being in an automobile accident, the loss of a loved one, etc. What all of these activities have in common is that they had us intensely involved.

One experience that can be used to illustrate this point for many people is the assassination of President Kennedy. Many people remember, with exacting detail, where they were when they heard about it, what they thought, what happened next and on through the events that followed over the four days. Even though this occurred over thirty years ago, many people can still remember it much more vividly than they remember what happened thirty days ago.

As a matter of fact, there is a detail associated with the Kennedy assassination that is quite unique and can help us to understand this relationship of involvement with memory on an even higher plane. It goes like this. In the United States there are many suicides every day. It is a big country and therefore never a day goes by that forty or fifty, or a hundred people decide to kill themselves. We simply do not have days when nobody commits suicide. But we did. In November of 1963, we not only had a day with no suicides, we had four consecutive days with no suicides and they were the same four days that we associate with the Kennedy assassination. Coincidence? Not a chance! No one committed suicide during those four days for the same reason that so many people can remember those days so clearly today. We were involved. We were doing what human beings are supposed to do. We were intensely involved, fully alive and using our faculties as they are designed to be used.

For the moment this is a discussion of memory and it seems appropriate to digress briefly on this important subject. Most people would like to be able to remember well and perhaps, to improve their memories. There is a very simple way to improve your memory. It is to get excited about your life. If you find yourself bored with your life, do something about it. If you find yourself going through the motions of living, cut it out! Dig into your life. Dig into your job. Whatever you are doing, do it with zest. And, if you find yourself at a dead end after giving it your best effort, then make a critical decision to change where you are. But, whatever you do, live your life. Be alive, be excited and you will find that you will remember.

The Theft of Time

Because we remember the things we are highly involved with and do not remember the things that bore us, our memories are comfortable. The activities that we remember were important. The time we wasted, we do not recall. This can help us to feel good about ourselves but it also

enables us to squander our lives without realizing that we are doing it. It is as though we are being robbed of the most valuable asset we have, the time of our lives, and we don't even know it is happening.

Summary of the Psychology of Time Management

First, we need to realize that we cannot do everything. Certainly people can be involved in a wide variety of activities and still live highly effective lives but they must make decisions that give a central course to their lives and they must keep getting back to that course. Then it helps to realize that our memories play tricks on us as we remember our actions to be more important than they are. Once we have these two thoughts well in mind we should be ready to try out some of the techniques of time management. And, if we do it well, we may become the masters of our time.

Techniques of Time Management

The A B C Approach

Developed by Don Schoeller at the Wharton School, during the 40s and 50s, The ABC Approach to Time Management operates as follows. First, you list the things that you do with your time. Then you sort them into highly valuable, "A", intermediate value, "B" and low value, "C". Then keep track of your time for a day or so. Then total up the amount of time that you spent involved with activities of each of the three categories. Don Schoeller worked with managers and engineers in his classes in the extension program at the Wharton School. When they collected this data they found that they were invariably spending more time on class "C" activities than they thought they were and considerably less time on class "A" activities.

Don assembled data to the effect that these managers and engineers were spending about fifteen percent of their time on their valuable activities and around sixty percent of their time on low value activities. If this is the case, then it is easy to see how a person could double the time spent on valuable activities and still be using only thirty percent of his or her time on them. Why not go ahead and double it again. As for the low value activities, many of them simply aren't worth doing. Those low value activities that must be done merit study to find the fastest and easiest way of doing them so that our time can be freed up for more valuable activities.

This is, essentially, the Work Simplification approach that attacks time consuming tasks in order to free up time for more valuable accomplishments. It also helps to explain how it is that some people get so much done in their lives while others, in the same amount of time with similar opportunities, accomplish so little.

Work Distribution charting

This technique is an adaptation of the ABC Approach for use with a group of people who work together. First they make a list of their activities, making sure that they all break down the work into the same sorts of activities. Then they keep track of their time for a day or two and they total the time spent on each activity. Then one of them prepares a spread sheet listing the people across the top and the activities down the side. In the intersections they post the total time that each person spent on each activity. When they total horizontally, across the spread sheet, they can see how much time they have spent as a group on each activity.

This information is usually unavailable for two reasons. First, as individuals they cannot remember how much time they spent on each activity and second, even if they did, they would not be able to remember how much time the other people spent on each activity.

Once this information is available, there may be some surprises. Often, low value activities are found to be tying up far more time than they are worth and this puts a challenge in front of the group to figure out how reduce that time. Sometimes reports can be discontinued. It helps to convert the time to dollars worth of time and put a price on the report. Is it worth it? And, it should be understood that if the report is discontinued it will not mean that that amount of money will be saved. It will mean that that amount of time will be made available for more valuable activities.

Summary

Time is the most valuable asset that any person has. Yet an enormous amount of it is squandered. (And, the squandering is based on the values of the person who is wasting the time, not on the values of someone else.) We waste our time partly because we tend to think we have more time than we do and partly because we don't remember the time we waste. It helps to let a clock tell us how much time we are spending on our different activities. The nice thing about using a clock is that it is objective. It does not care whether we are doing the most important thing in our life or absolute trivia, it counts each minute the same. Then each of us needs to make decisions about what we want to do with our time and get on with living and mastering our lives.