

— THE MYTH OF — TIME MANAGEMENT

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ONCE UPON A TIME, TIME MANAGEMENT WAS A USEFUL TOOL FOR EXECUTIVES AND MANAGERS WHO WANTED TO BE MORE EFFICIENT AND MORE EFFECTIVE ON THE JOB AND THROUGHOUT THEIR CAREERS. THE ERA IN WHICH THE USE OF TIME MANAGEMENT WILL AID ANYONE HAS PASSED.

One hundred years ago, Frederick Taylor and Frank Gilbreth astounded the industrial world by establishing time and motion procedures which enabled employers to get higher productivity from their workers. In doing so, Taylor and Gilbreth established the basis of modern day time management techniques, which were widely adopted by executives.

To this day, time management speakers and trainers come in all shapes and sizes. Time management, however, can no longer solve anyone's problems.

SO LONG, FAREWELL

Time management employs rules, such as "handle each piece of paper once." Such rules worked well in a simpler era. If employed today, they lead to breakdowns. The industrial age has given over to the information age. The difficulty is that we all face too much information. More information is generated on earth every minute than you could ingest in the rest of your life.

Time management worked well in the traditional work setting of "nine to five" where there were clearly defined roles, a sharp distinction between producers and consumers, and linear progression of activities.

- **Nine to five?** The mass commute wherein everyone comes to work at 8 a.m. or 9 a.m., and goes at 5 p.m., is a component vital to the environment in which time management can work. With the advent of modems, e-mail, fax machines, teleconferencing, global communications and global trade, we've entered an era in which the components for 24-hour society are in place. Hence, a manager may supervise five or six team members who are rarely in the office at the same time that the manager is.
- **Clearly defined roles?** With the advent of organization by matrix rather than hierarchy, management teams, empowerment, core and supplemental staff, reengineering and downsizing, the prospect of clearly defined roles is diminishing all the time.
- **A sharp distinction between producers and consumers?** The distinction between producers and consumers is blur-



ring. If you buy a computer, uniquely configure it, or write your own software, you're both a consumer and producer. The same holds true if you buy a book on home maintenance and then fix things yourself rather than calling a carpenter, a plumber or a mason.

In the workplace, many of the goods and services provided to end-users today help them to be better producers. Moreover, we find increasingly that today's consumers provide data to producers that help them to be better at what they're producing. Witness the supermarket shoppers who, by virtue of their purchases, give the store manager as well as food manufacturers valuable data on what to offer and how to price it.

- **Linear progression of activities?** The notion of linear

progression is most aptly illustrated by the assembly line in the old Charlie Chaplin movies. The widget moved along a conveyor belt and each worker added value in some way, even if it was simply twisting on a bottle cap.

Years later, the automated factory replaced the workers but still maintained linear progression of processes. Today, with mass customization, object-oriented software, voice mail and messaging systems, compact discs and a host of other innovations, the notion of linear progression has been all but turned on its ear.

These developments and a variety of others now emerging have conspired to render traditional time management advice impotent. The number of variables affecting one's schedule, workload, direction shifts and responsibilities simply cannot be governed by antiquated notions such as "Handle each piece of paper once."

ROASTING THE SACRED COWS

The six "sacred cows" below represent conventional time management wisdom. Following each bit of "wisdom" is what I call the Breathing Space approaches that serve as guiding princi-

ples. While time management was a set of rules that worked well in a relatively finite setting, Breathing Space principles will prove to be far more effective for the ever-changing multi-variable situations that executives and managers face today.

- **Handling Paper.** Wisdom: "Handle each piece of paper once." Breathing Space perspective: It always depends on what a piece of paper says; you may have to handle some papers 25 times! Never handle most pieces of paper; don't let them cross your desk.
- **Reducing Clutter.** Wisdom: "When in doubt, throw it out." Breathing Space perspective: Not bad advice, but hang onto things when you sense downstream consequences of not doing so. Pack up and store current nonessentials and check them again later.
- **Being More Efficient.** Wisdom: "Speed reading, listening, learning." Breathing Space perspective: We walk, talk, eat, read, listen and learn at certain speeds for a reason. Notice that the most successful people in your profession are not in a hurry. It can be harmful for you to accelerate basic personal functioning. Operate at a pace that is comfortable for you.
- **Beating the Competition.** Wisdom: "Work smarter, not harder." Breathing Space perspective: Was Edison smart

after 8,000 attempts to invent the light bulb? When it finally worked, did his I.Q. rise? Working longer and being open to new viewpoints leads to “smarter.”

- **Managing Your Schedule.** Wisdom: “Use sophisticated scheduling tools.” Breathing Space perspective: Electronic calendars, time management software and so forth will fail when you don’t keep them current. Tackle the few key projects that count; have the guts to leave the rest.
- **Staying Informed.** Wisdom: “Read Key Executive Publications.” Breathing Space perspective: More information is generated on earth each day than you could ingest in the rest of your life; it is almost immaterial which and how many publications you read. Choose to keep abreast of broad-based patterns affecting your region, industry, your clients, community or family.

AN OVERABUNDANCE OF CHOICES

Alvin Toffler, writer and futurist, predicted that we would be overwhelmed by too many items competing for our time and attention, especially in the workplace. He foresaw that this would inhibit action, result in greater anxiety and trigger the perception of less freedom and less time. Having choices is a blessing of a free market economy. Having too many choices is harmful to your breathing space and results in increased time expenditure and a mounting form of exhaustion.

Whenever you’re about to make a low-level decision, consider: Does this really make a difference? The manager today who seeks to stop racing the clock, keep piles from ever starting, and have more energy each day needs new perspectives and fresh approaches for managing his career and his life. Get in the habit of making fewer decisions each day—the ones that count.

A COMBINED EFFECT

The combined effect of facing too much to do each day accelerates the feeling of pressure, although the symptoms are often masked. One example is engaging in activities simultaneously, such as reading while eating. Other symptoms abound, however. Do you attempt to think with distractions? Are longstanding hobbies no longer of interest? Do friends only merit an occasional phone call?

If you’re too busy to enjoy your life, you’re too busy. If you’re too busy to stay calm, you’re too busy. If you’re too busy to stay in shape, you’re too busy.

Lacking a balance between work and play, responsibility and respite, “getting things done” can become an end-all. You function like a “human doing” instead of a human being, trying to employ time management techniques ever more vigorously. You begin to link executing the items on your growing “to do” list with feelings of self-worth. As the list grows, the lingering feeling of having more to do can infiltrate your sense of self-acceptance.

On a deeply felt personal level, recognize that hereafter, you will face an ever-increasing array of items competing for your attention. It is time to make compassionate, though difficult, choices about what is best ignored versus what merits your attention and action.

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jeff Davidson helps organizations and individuals manage the relentless onslaught of information overload. Davidson’s website, www.BreathingSpace.com, discusses his keynote speeches and seminars. Jeff is executive director of the Breathing Space® Institute, a popular speaker and the author of numerous books, including *The 60 Second Organizer* (Adams Media) and *Complete Idiot’s Guide to Managing Your Time* (Alpha/Penguin). To book Jeff call him directly at 800/735-1994.*