

It's Not About Time

Tips for Managing Yourself

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Most people admit they could use better time-management skills. But the issue of time management has not been addressed to universal satisfaction, because it really isn't about managing time. No one can manage time well enough to turn six minutes into five minutes. If it was just a matter of time, simply using a calendar and a watch would handle it. While a clock or calendar can give you a measure of control, it won't provide the larger perspective needed for greater success—self-management.

The savvy know self-management is really an issue of what we do with ourselves during the time we have. Self-management needs to encompass managing our thoughts and emotions, and dealing effectively with our work, family and community relationships. It's about gaining dynamic balance of control and perspective to achieve more successful outcomes and feel more relaxed along the way.

Self-management is about knowing what to do at any given moment. It's dealing effectively with the things we have to do to achieve our goals and fulfill our purpose. It's also about deciding the importance of the varied and constant information coming at us.

Dispense with the notion that time is harder to manage because there's too much information. Many people are so chronically overwhelmed with new information they consider themselves roadkill along the information superhighway. Too much information is not the problem. If it were, we'd walk into a library and faint from the presence of so much data. We would run from the computer having gone just a few clicks into the results of a search, since each hyperlink leads to a seemingly infinite number of other Web pages. Information overload indicates we're not managing our commitments effectively.

Self-management is about how we manage our commitments to achieve success at various horizons of focus in our lives. Horizons include life purpose, values, long and short-term goals, personal and professional areas of responsibility, projects and specific actions. As the CEO of your life, you're in charge of the strategy and tactics needed to see your horizons clearly.

Self-management is about collecting, creating and deciding what (if anything) we want to do about each piece of information and organizing the results of that knowledge into a trusted system we can review appropriately. Upon review, we need to make intuitive strategic and tactical choices about our options.

A key aspect of self-management is how we handle all the things we've told ourselves we could or should do. People often keep several hundred hours of undone stuff in their minds (consciously or subconsciously) or in stacks on their desk or in the glove compartment of the car or their e-mail in-box. All of that unprocessed stuff may represent many projects and actions.

It's hard to manage projects and actions unless they show up on your radar in a useful way. Projects need to be defined and reviewed as stakes in the ground to keep us moving toward their respective goal lines. The goal line for each project is the successful result. It could be as simple as "garden gate latch repaired," or more complex like, "college degree earned." The steps to move toward the goal line of success need to be defined by answering, "What's the very next action that will move this project forward?" This is a method of executing elegantly and intuitively when the ball is snapped, instead of continually thinking about what to do next.

I ask people, “What’s the next action?” on big projects they’re procrastinating about. The answer often is, “Find time to...” You won’t ever have time to change your corporate culture, write a book or lose weight until you define the very next action. If the next action is, “Pick a date and e-mail my assistant to set the senior team meeting about changing our culture,” you can move forward on a major project in about two minutes.

Getting Things Done is my work-life management system that will help you go from personal stress and being overwhelmed to an integrated system of focus and control.

Getting Things Done is based on the common sense notion that a complete and current inventory of all your commitments—organized and reviewed in a systematic way—allows you to focus clearly, view your world from optimal angles and make trusted choices about what to do (and not do) at any moment. The distinct practices include:

- Capture anything and everything that has your attention into a trusted system.
- Define actionable things into outcomes and concrete next steps.
- Organize reminders and information in the most streamlined way, in appropriate categories, based on how and when you need to access them.
- Keep current with frequent reviews of the six horizons of your commitments (purposes, values, goals, areas of responsibility, projects and actions).

This systematic approach to self-management has become essential in an age when people have more access to information, producing a sense that there is too little time. Since one key to your competitive advantage is your ability to deal with surprise, let’s look at how self-management differs from time management in that regard. If you are simply managing your time, you may have blocked out part of the morning to make calls. So far so good. But let’s say that a few minutes before you are going to start making your calls, you hear from one of your best clients. This client wants to introduce you to another client who has the potential to bring you even more business. All you need to do is put together a brief proposal to deliver that afternoon.

At that point you can choose to stick with time management, holding to the schedule you previously set for yourself. Or you can choose to look from a higher perspective, realizing that this new opportunity is more aligned with your long-term goals. With a list of your calls at hand, you can quickly scan to determine that none of them has to be done today. You can shift your priority to the new client opportunity, knowing that it is the most appropriate place for you to focus your time. Self-management goes beyond time management, in that it allows you to respond at your best to surprises.

Most people say they have far more to do than time and energy allow. This outcomes-and-actions approach will help you get things done that are most meaningful to you. That’s the best way to manage yourself and your valuable time.