Short on time? 7 keys to maximising your work day

Leaders of tomorrow need better ways to manage their time. Blake Beattie has assembled the principles to do just that.

The best way to manage time has been a topic of debate since the ancient Egyptians first used sundials for measuring the parts of a day back in 1500BC. Each day we are gifted with 86,400 seconds, but are we consciously aware of where all our time goes and how efficient and effective we are with it? The answer for most of us is no. For most, the time patterns we ran with over the past few years will be repeated in the years to come.

Yet, great time management is a game-changer. It can mean the difference between a stressed out, underperforming executive and one that not only gets the right things done in a timely fashion, but also has time to invest where it counts.

It is tougher than ever before for leaders to take control of their time and utilise it in the best way possible. In part, this is caused by greater digital distraction, shorter attention spans, increased contactability and blurred lines between work and home life. So what are the new time principles for the leaders of tomorrow?

1. Begin with the end in mind

Granted, on the surface this seems like nothing new. Stephen Covey and many others have been preaching the value of this concept for many years. Being crystal clear on the highest priority outcomes is immensely valuable when managing time well. However, it is worth taking this principle one step further. Many leaders are not clear on what great outcomes look like across multiple time periods (each day, week, month, quarter and year). From experience, leaders will have clarity on outcomes in one or more of these time periods, but rarely all of them. How will you know if today was a successful day? And do teams even know what a winning day or week looks like?

2. Map it

A good GPS navigation system helps you get from A to B using the fastest route possible. Spending a few minutes mapping key actions to prioritise outcomes is a no-brainer for effective leaders. If you want to take it one step further, add a time dimension to the intended actions. Map out how long you believe work will take and monitor the return on time (ROT) for your efforts. Some great lessons can surface as you become clearer on where your time goes and which tasks delivered the greatest return over time.

3. The power hour

Condensing time is a great way to get clear on what's important. It stems from the Pareto principle that supports the notion that 80% of achievements occur in 20% of the time available. Imagine that you only had one hour available for work in a day. I know, sounds crazy right? Surely not much can be achieved in such a short time frame. Au contraire, it encourages leaders to focus on the critical stuff and helps them answer key questions including:

- What are the MUST do items that will contribute to the priority goals of the business?
- What is the BEST USE of my time given my role?
- What items SHOULD be delegated, delayed or deleted?

These are some great questions that are asked too infrequently. The best leaders embark on the right actions, at the right time, in the most effective and efficient way. If leaders complete their power hour early in the day then it helps build momentum.

4. Use technology for greater efficiency

Technological change is happening faster than you can say "the iphone will never gain any significant market share". Former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer may regret that comment but the lesson remains. Technology is changing and will continue to change exponentially whether we like it or not. The challenge is to find technology that helps leaders lead better. This includes using technology to better manage our time and stay focused on what matters most, as well as reducing digital distraction.

5. The one thing

Ask simply, "If I had today over, what one thing would I have done differently to achieve more?", then commit to making that improvement tomorrow. A few minutes of reflection each day can make all the difference to realigning work practices with business priorities and championing a continuous improvement mindset.

6. Time blocking

There is tremendous value in blocking out time in advance for each day, week, month or year for important areas. Without time set aside, diaries can be quickly filled by urgent but not necessarily strategically important tasks. As an example, longer term, strategic thinking is one area that may get underplayed without time being set aside. The tricky thing for leaders is to stick to the time blocks despite the pressures of other time demands that surface.

7. Remove distractions

The amount of potential distractions for leaders has increased exponentially over the past few years. From pop-up alerts on digital devices and the proliferation of emails to the rise of open-plan offices, leaders need to navigate some distraction-heavy terrain. According to a recent study by the University of California, it takes an average of 23 minutes to get back on task after being distracted. Therefore, the post-distraction period in many cases is way more damaging than the distraction itself! Using the do not disturb or flight modes on your phone is one way to limit distractions (if your role allows it).

'Starve your distractions, feed your focus.'
– Anonymous

Busyness for many leaders is worn like a badge of honour. We have all heard the catchcry, "I'm just so busy at the moment" or "I just haven't had time", as though it's a good thing. But, of course, it may not be a good thing. After all, activity does not equal productivity. There is no use in being productive in something that isn't that important.

'The bad news is time flies. The good news is you're the pilot.' *– Michael Altshuler*

We only have limited time in work and in life; it makes sense to spend it wisely. By utilising some of the principles above, you won't just become a better time manager, you will become a better leader and inspire others to do the same.

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