

HOW TO IMPLEMENT STRATEGIC TIME MANAGEMENT

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A common complaint in today's workplace is that there is not enough time to get everything done. Doing more with less has become business as usual. The one resource that we cannot get more of is time. We all get 24 hours a day, no matter what. Although we cannot manufacture minutes, we can make better use of the ones we get. In some cases, that is easier said than done. But in other cases, a few simple questions and a new way of prioritizing your work can make it feel like you have gained some control over your precious minutes each day. Shifting your perspective can make all the difference. This guide helps you look at your use of time and how you can make better use of it by giving you the questions to ask and the ways to prioritize.

WHY IS STRATEGIC TIME MANAGEMENT IMPORTANT?

Consider some of the constraints that employees at all levels of the organization are working under. They are expected to accomplish multiple objectives with:

- Reduced budgets.
- Decreased staffing levels.

- A focus on bottom-line results.

At the same time, there has been an increased interest and focus on improving work/life balance. Though these objectives may seem to be almost irreconcilable, that is not necessarily true. The concept of strategic time management (STM) is designed to help you and your employees:

- Work smarter, not harder.
- Make decisions that maximize the value of your time.
- Focus on strategic, value-added, high-priority work.
- Achieve a better work/life balance.

By adjusting your mind-set on maximizing your time and effort rather than squeezing more and more activities into your calendar (and your mind), you can achieve more effective results. This perspective contradicts the widely held reverence for multitasking people who are able to juggle several projects, issues, or activities. At some point, even the most organized and driven people hit overload and the quality of their work suffers. STM attempts to intervene before that breaking point is reached.

What makes STM different from the many tools and techniques on the market these days? It is a simple shift in perspective. It is not about calendars, PDAs, date books, goal pyramids, or colorful Post-it notes. That is not to say that you need to throw out your current time management tools. Keep them. Just use them more effectively by asking yourself (and others) some key questions to help you prioritize your entries or items on your to-do list, whether it is for you as an individual or for the team, department, and company. Ideally, the use of strategic time management will spread so that the full benefits can be realized. But, even if you are the only one using STM, you will see and feel measurable results.

CURRENT STATE

We often accept assignments with little thought. When the boss says, “I need that report by Tuesday,” we do it without hesitation. Though I do not advocate insubordination, occasionally questioning the need for tasks or activities can be beneficial and appropriate. As a case in point, can you think of any examples in your organization of tasks or reports that are completed out of habit rather than from a serious need? Have you ever attended meetings week after week or month after month just because they are on the calendar or you are on the list of invitees, rather than going for a specific purpose (e.g., collect or disseminate information, cast a vote, brainstorm)? If you answered yes, you are not alone. Much of what we do at work is out of habit. As a consequence, we often cling to outdated policies, procedures, and paperwork rather than performing strategic, value-added work.

STM creates a framework for broaching what, in some organizations, might be considered sacred cows, subjects spoken of in a whisper when the boss is out of the room or the constant target of jokes around the proverbial watercooler. For example, it might be the mandatory all-hands meeting that 90 percent of the attendees dread because the content is boring, the presentations are dry, and the information is irrelevant to their daily jobs. Maybe it is a quarterly budget report that gets printed, collated, bound, and delivered to hundreds of managers—and gets read by 10 percent of the recipients and skimmed by another 20 percent. Perhaps it is an eight-hour employee orientation session that irritates the hiring supervisor and new employee alike.

Although there is widespread recognition that each of these activities is a resource drain and of little value to the intended audience, very strong social norms often discourage employees from expressing criticism (even if it is constructive). By adopting the STM philosophy, you will find it much easier to break such norms and identify areas for improvement. Once the dialog is started, decisions can be made as to which, if any, elements of the old process stay. In some instances, I liken the person who is willing to broach the subject to the character who first admits that the emperor has no clothes when everyone else is pretending that he is dressed in fine garments.

For those willing to step forward and confront the lack of value, potential improvements might include (a) employee involvement in the all-hands meeting agendas and shortening the meeting time to 60 minutes, (b) sending the budget report via email so that the interested parties can print it out or skim it online, (c) combining some computer-based training with an interactive Q&A session to shorten the orientation to four hours instead of a full day.

These types of situations demonstrate how STM can be used as a high-impact intervention. Without spending millions of dollars and hours formulating a step-by-step flow diagram to identify process improvements, you can ask a few pointed questions to help you make immediate changes to the process. The result is more available time to focus on key initiatives (which could very well include a more detailed examination of the end-to-end process and what other changes need to be made).

GETTING STARTED

When push comes to shove, you can make better use of your time in essentially three ways:

1. *Discontinue* low-priority tasks or activities.
2. *Be more efficient* in performing your tasks.
3. *Delegate* the work to someone else.

Although any or all of these options decrease the amount of time you spend on a task, you need to consider some inherent risks. For example, you might feel a task has low value, but not everyone will agree. You might create a hardship or bottleneck if you suddenly stop performing a specific task. Attempts to increase efficiency often result in a proposal for additional technology (along with the expenses and resources needed to introduce new technology into an organization). Delegation, if not done effectively, can result in extra work rather than a reduction. Although there is no one-size-fits-all solution, it is helpful to consider each of these options before taking action so that you can examine the positive and negative consequences.

Although it is important to challenge tasks, activities, and processes that are not contributing to the desired goals, you can be more effective if you avoid criticizing people or putting them on the defensive. For example, do not confront the budget director with a long list of complaints or ignore his or her stated guidelines. Instead, ask, “Is there anything we can do to improve the process for generating a budget to save time and money?” By engaging others in the dialog, you can arrive at solutions that benefit all the parties without placing blame.

THE KEY IS ASKING QUESTIONS

Depending on the scope of your implementation, the questions will be directed to different audiences. At the granular level, you can challenge your choices about how you are spending your limited time. As your activities start to directly affect others, you should include them in the questioning and decision process. The more people who start asking these types of questions, the more impact you will see on the organization’s ability to focus its time and resources on high-value-added work and to achieve its stated objectives.

Let me caution you. These questions will not help you be successful unless you are willing to be absolutely honest about the answers. If you do not really test the assumptions or explore the answers, the exercise is futile, and you will be right back where you started—without enough time to do the work that needs to be done.

You may want to reorder or rephrase these questions, but the basic content is the same regardless of industry, company, department, or job level. The premise behind STM is asking yourself questions before you add any tasks to your to-do list. Concentrate on three areas: the necessity of the task, appropriateness, and efficiency.

1. *Necessity:*
 - Does it need to be done or is it a nice-to-have?
 - When? How urgent is the need? (Beware of arbitrary, unrealistic deadlines.)
 - How? Does it add value to the client, team, department, company?

- How? Does it support corporate goals and strategy—short-and/or long-term?
2. *Appropriateness:*
 - Are you the right person or department to do the work? If not, does delegation make sense? To whom?
 - Who else is affected by your change? What are the downstream (or upstream) consequences for others?
 3. *Efficiency:*
 - Is there a better, faster, or simpler way to do it? What are the options? For example, can you accomplish it with no, minimal, or high-technology investment?
 - Can it be completed given the existing budget? If not, how can we modify it and still achieve the key objective?

HOW TO PRIORITIZE

After addressing the necessity, appropriateness, and efficiency questions, in addition to any that make sense for your unique situation or level of responsibility, you have a list of value-added activities that are worthy of your time. The next step is to prioritize the work. Although there are a number of methods for prioritizing, start with an overarching question that keeps you thinking at a strategic level before you get mired in the operational details, such as what is the best use of my time right now? If there is no overwhelmingly obvious choice, you might consider some combination of these subquestions:

- How do these activities help me reach my goal(s)?
- Given what is happening right now, is this the best use of my time?
- Given what I anticipate (in a given time frame), is this still the best use of my time?
- Am I helping to solve key issues in my department or for my client?
- Do I have the training I need to do the task? If not, what do I need to do?
- Am I getting high value for my time (e.g., meetings, committees, networking activities)?
- Can I explain the rationale behind my action plan to others? For example, if my peer or boss challenges me on my decision to work on Task A rather than Task B, I need to have a clear line of sight between my work and the goal(s).

Even if you are unable to make these decisions without approval from your supervisor, they still provide a framework for a useful discussion that shows that you are committed to providing value-added service or products to your clients. These dialogs are often the beginning of

valuable explorations about what work gets done and the processes and procedures that are long overdue for examination. That is the power of the questions.

STAYING THE COURSE

Once you establish your list of strategic objectives and carefully prioritize your work, do not get sidetracked. Though we all know that we should stay focused, we also need to realize how easy it is to be distracted. In some cases, the distractions have become so much a part of the corporate landscape that they steal time without us realizing it—unless we are paying attention and taking action to combat them. Some of these time thieves include:

- *Disorganization*: Misplaced files, messy desk, time spent searching.
- *Procrastination*: Putting yourself in a bind by starting at the last minute.
- *Inability to say no*: Also known as fear of offending others, or appearing unable.
- *Interruptions*: Visitors who barge in or overstay their welcome.
- *Telephone calls*: Especially those with no clear purpose or time frame.
- *Email or traditional mail*: Opening, reading, or responding to mail when other work is more important.
- *Waiting for others*: Time wasted if you are not prepared with some to-do items.
- *Meetings with no agenda or time frame*: Wandering off track, killing time.
- *Reacting to crises*: Sometimes avoidable with planning (and no procrastination).
- *Travel/commuting time*: Making it useful when practical (and safe).

To avoid or minimize the common time wasters, use the same key questions used throughout STM, such as, how does this help me reach my objective or contribute to my success? Is this really a good use of my time right now? Most likely, if you catch yourself (or others) engaging in these behaviors, you can put a stop to them before losing too much momentum. Awareness and diligence are critical to maintaining your forward motion.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

Because there are only 24 hours in a day, spend them wisely and effectively. Make a conscious and strategic decision about how to focus your resources to maximize your impact and discover “extra” time. You can be most successful if you:

- Have a clear understanding of what is most important.
- Ask yourself (and others) the right questions to determine the best way to spend your time:
 - Be willing to tactfully question long-standing practices.
 - Ask, how does this help me reach my goal?
 - Be aware of necessity, appropriateness, efficiency.
- Be honest about your answers.
- Challenge yourself to focus on value-added work.
- Minimize time wasters.

The key is a shift in perspective or mind-set that makes you question which activities are worthy of your time and effort. When you are protective of your time, you see a difference in how you handle work assignments as well as the time you find to do the things that you value. The time to start is now ... the clock is ticking.