

Twenty Secrets for Managing Your Time (and Life!)

Know Yourself

1. **Know what you want to accomplish.** Define the *purpose* of your life and work. What do you want to accomplish in your life and work? Decide how/where your current job fits into this purpose . . . and then pursue it with passion. Don't lose sight of what *sustains* you, what keeps you going. Look for meaning in your work and you will find it.
2. **Know your rhythms and tendencies.** When, during the day, are you the sharpest? When, during the day, are you at your lowest point in respect to energy? Are you easily distracted by incoming e-mails? Internet headlines? The comings and goings of the office? The scenic view out your window? Organize your key decisions and actions around your peak times. Schedule a walk or some other refresher during your low times. Root out and remove your distracters.
3. **Create the structure you need and develop a system that works for you.** What works for your boss or a peer may not work for you. You need to find the methods, techniques, structures, and systems that get you the results you need to achieve your life/work goals. *Everybody* has a "system" that they use to get results (or not). Try a variety of tools (don't stop at just one) and then develop the habits and the discipline to actually *implement* the system that gets the results you need in your life/work. And, if you're not getting the results you need, improve the system you have.
4. **Engage in self-evaluation and reflection.** Routinely assess your progress at meeting your personal and professional objectives. Where are you experiencing success? Where are you missing the mark? What are your innate talents? How can you leverage these talents to enhance your overall effectiveness? What can you get better at? In which areas of your professional life are you beyond salvation (e.g., whatever you do, you'll never be a master at delegation)? How can you use your talents to overcome this potential vulnerability?

Know and Master Your Strategy

5. **Get absolute organizational clarity on your strategic objectives.** Be deeply aware of what the company expects of you and your team/work area. *What is the strategic contribution/value of your work and the work of your team?* If you can't answer this question . . . keep looking and asking until you can. Draw a bright blue line that connects your company's strategic objectives and the business plan to the work that you do. Without a doubt, know which deliverables matter and what is expected in terms of performance and accountability.
6. **Make choices.** You and your team have a fixed amount of time and resources to meet your performance challenges. *What are the most important things you should be working on?* Decide on your top three or four priorities and then integrate their fulfillment into everything you do. Focus on these critical few and don't be distracted by all of the lower order priorities that clamor for your time. When making choices and setting priorities, take the long-view. This will help you

stay focused on the vision and not be distracted by operational and tactical demands on your time. For each potential priority, ask yourself:

- *How does this issue move me/our team toward our strategic vision?*
7. **Be flexible.** Set clear priorities and aggressively pursue attaining them—but always be open to new and emerging issues that may need to move to the front of the line. No organization is (nor should be) static in its strategic, operational, and tactical goals. Each day presents a new set of challenges. A critical task for effective managers is to be able to separate out the *strategic* from the operational and tactical and then make adjustments to their personal and work unit priorities to reflect the integration of emerging issues. Before responding reflexively to urgent requests, slow down to ask yourself:
- *Will doing this task, accepting this as a new work priority, move me/us closer to our strategic vision?*
 - *Is there a real timeline associated with this new task/responsibility that must be considered?*
 - *Is this request coming from someone I can't ignore?*
8. **Focus on results.** Everything you personally take on or take on for your team or work area *must* be anchored back to the company's strategic vision, the business plan, and how these translate into the strategic contribution of your team. For this reason, your work must focus on generating results that directly contribute to these driving elements. Build measurement and accountability into every task you take on and every assignment you pass on to your team. Ask yourself:
- *How will results on this task be measured?*
 - *What does a successful end result look like?*
 - *How will we know that we're making progress on this goal/challenge?*
 - *How would my boss describe a successful result?*

Become a Master of Execution

9. **Gather the information you need.** Before you can be a master of execution, you need to know what you need to know to get the job done right. Some questions to ask yourself:
- *What data do you need to make the decision?*
 - *Whose authority will be required to give the project a "thumbs up?"*
 - *What needs to happen first to accomplish this task?*
10. **Do one thing at a time.** Multi-tasking means that you will likely do a number of things with only mediocre results—and have a higher likelihood of failure with at least one of the things that you are attempting to multi-task. Decide what single thing is most important for you to do and do only that. When you're done with that single thing, then move to the next single thing. Talking on the phone while reading e-mail, scanning a memo during a staff meeting, and thinking about your *next* meeting when you're having a one-on-one with a staffer, are all examples where

your focus is diffused and you'll end up doing none of your tasks well. Focus on what's in front of you (what you set as your highest priority activity) and then just get it done . . . and move on to the next.

11. **Do it now. Don't procrastinate.** Don't put things—especially your high priority items—off. For every task in front of you, do one of the following: (a) do it now, take an action or make a decision; (b) delegate it to someone else; (c) dump it (put it in the circular file); or (d) file it for future consideration. If you “file it” make sure that it's due to legitimate issues (e.g., you need more information) and identify a date when you will pick it up again for a decision/action.
12. **Work from a list.** Develop your “daily list” of tasks that reflect your key strategic priorities. Work exclusively from this list as you start to work. As new issues or tasks emerge (e.g., phone calls, e-mails, someone stopping by to make a request, etc.), add the new issue/task to your list and reshuffle your priorities for the day. Your “to do” list is a constantly evolving roster of key actions and decisions that you decide require some energy from you. If an item makes it to your list, then it is a priority. Once an item is accomplished, you move to the next priority. If an issue disappears as a priority, then drop it from your list.
13. **Control your calendar.** Aggressively protect your time. Block out times when you are *never* available (e.g., first hour of each day, last hour of each day, Friday afternoons, etc.) and then honor these times yourself to do what you need to do to manage your work. Whenever you are invited to attend/participate in a meeting, be mindful about whether you really need to attend or not. Believe that it is okay to decline requests (giving a reason) or ask someone else to attend in your stead. Ask yourself:
 - *Is attending this meeting essential to my work here?*
 - *Am I the best person to represent my area — or is someone else on my team better suited to what is required?*
 - *Might my time/energy be better and more strategically spent elsewhere?*
14. **Use the tools of self-management.** While you need to find your own system (see tip #3), be aware of and use specific time and self-management tools to help you manage your attention and energy. Some useful tools include:
 - *Outlook Meeting Scheduler*
 - *Outlook Task Manager*
 - *45-file system* (Note: The 45-file system includes 31 files for each day of the month, 12 files for the months of the year, and two files for the next two years. For each request, appointment, decision, or task that must be fulfilled, decide when you need to begin work on the issue and then drop it into the appropriate file.)
15. **Look back, think ahead.** At the end of every day and at the end of every week, reflect back on the work that has been accomplished and what hasn't been accomplished. Identify issues that may need further work and new issues that have surfaced since the last “look back/think ahead” time. Reflect upon your strategic priorities (see tip #5). Thinking ahead for the next time frame (day or week),

reprioritize your new list of tasks, with the high priority items requiring your primary focus for the next day/week at the top of the list. End each day or week with a clear sense of what's on the "docket" for tomorrow/next week.

16. **Begin each day and week with clarity of intent and purposeful action.** Start each day and week with your prioritized list (see tip #19) and begin work on your high priority items. Stay flexible (see tip #7) and adjust your priorities as the day and week unfold—but stay on task. Never lose your focus.

Know and Manage Your Team [If You Manage/Lead Others]

17. **Get to know your team well—very well.** The best leaders know the strengths, assets, talents, vulnerabilities, and breaking points of their team. Spend time assessing the talents that your direct reports bring to their work. Stay plugged in to their challenges, conflicts, and stress points. Know your team members as individuals. Ask yourself:
 - *What does this person bring to his or her job?*
 - *What talents can the company tap to leverage this talent into results?*
 - *What gets this person excited about coming to work every day?*
 - *Where does his or her passion for his/her work lie?*
18. **Actively manage your staff.** With a deeper knowledge of what each of your staff members bring to the table and to the company, actively work with them individually to match their talents/contributions to doing what is most required of them to create the greatest strategic value. Too often we take staff competence for granted, making assumptions about what they understand as performance expectations or what "strategic value" performance looks like. Effective managers set aside time each week to make connections, give direction, provide feedback, celebrate accomplishments, and debrief disasters. Staying connected and involved in managing your staff provides a high value return on investment: your people will more often do the right things because both you and they know the strategic objective and you both have confidence in their abilities to get the job done. An additional plus is that there will be fewer surprises along the way.
19. **Communicate your expectations and continue refining the team's strategic agenda.** Each person on your team should be driven forward in their work by the team's overarching strategic objective. Knowing the talents/assets of your staff and actively managing their contribution is key—but ensuring that their work continues to align with both the *deliberate* (planned) and *emergent* (unplanned) strategies is what ensures productivity and value-added performance. Conduct monthly, weekly "huddles" around big-picture strategy. Use a variety of methods to bring people up-to-date with emerging issues, shifting priorities, and operational/tactical challenges. Engage them in becoming *strategic thinkers*. Learn their perspectives on goals, strategies, trends, and challenges for the team and for the company as a whole. Ask individual members of your team—and the team as a whole:
 - *What do you see as our top strategic priorities for the week/month?*

- *What are you hearing from our customers that suggests something that we should give some attention to?*
 - *How might we tackle this operational/tactical challenge from a strategic perspective?*
 - *What issues and trends are you seeing that I'm not seeing—but need to see?*
20. **Delegate what you can.** The best managers don't muscle their way to the top by working longer hours, making all the key decisions, or being involved in managing the details. Executive performance actually declines as managers put more hours on the clock much beyond 50 hours per week. With a deep knowledge of the talents and assets of your team, it's critical to translate these assets into results—that don't involve you. Sort through your own list of task priorities. Select two or three that only you can perform, and then work hard to delegate the rest. Leverage the talent and passion of your team by enlisting them in rising to the challenge of a new responsibility. Set clear expectations (develop a shared vision), establish "boundary conditions" (time, cost, quality, etc. parameters), define clear performance measures, discuss resources to support performance, and provide a positive context for why the "receiver" of the new task should say "Yes!" But, before you delegate, ask:
- *What is my objective in delegating this? (e.g., offloading work, developing someone on my staff, challenging and testing a staffer, distributing workload more evenly, freeing myself to focus on my top strategic issues, and so forth)*
 - *Who is the best "match" for what I'm looking for as a result and with the talents on my team?*
 - *Am I able/willing to let go and really give the performer some room to make this issue/task her or his own?*
 - *How will I respond if the person succeeds beyond my wildest imagination? If she or he falls flat on her/his face?*
 - *How can I best support the performer in reaching the goal?*
 - *How often will we "touch base" to keep the project on track and avoid surprises?*

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