

Improve your time management: 6 tips for managers

For many managers, the clock is their biggest adversary. Finding enough time in the day to complete every necessary project can be difficult. But the old adage of “work smarter, not harder” is based on the concept of managing the minutes in your day more efficiently. Here are six tips to help you work toward that goal:

1. Create quiet times. Essentially, this is time when you block out all interruptions. Inform your staff that a certain time, say 2 p.m. to 3 p.m., is off-limits except for emergency questions. Or you can set aside quiet times on a case-by-case basis by posting something on your door. Chances are, if you create quiet times, your staffers will solve problems on their own more efficiently.

If quiet times aren't an option, you can break away from interruptions by finding an empty office.

2. Handle paper only once. Productivity experts agree that the number one way to save time is to handle each piece of paper only once. If you pick up a piece of mail, deal with it right there. Act on it! Either toss it in the trash, file it for future reference in the appropriate place or hand it off.

If you read a memo, report or article and then hold it to deal with it later, you're wasting time. The exception: when you put it in a reading file for those times when you're waiting at an airport and have time to kill. If you're not saving it for an otherwise wasted time, act on it immediately.

The same is true with e-mail and voice mail. When you read or listen to it, decide right then and there what to do with it. Don't save it for a later date; that creates more work in the long run.

3. Limit the length of interruptions Be honest with employees or co-workers who stop to chat or run on too long at a meeting. Don't expect them to pick up on your subtle cues—like a door half shut or your frazzled look—that you're on a tight deadline. State clearly that “I have to finish this project by noon; can we discuss this problem right after?”

4. Create a time log. Jot down what you do all day, in increments of 15 minutes, for a week or two. You're looking for patterns of waste, interruptions that can be halted and tasks that can be delegated. This will help identify inefficiencies in your day.

Those informal conversations with co-workers can be valuable, but if they're taking five hours out of your workweek, that's more than 12 percent of your time! For time-management masters, a time log will help you further identify areas to curb.

5. Do what's most important. Time management isn't just doing more; it's doing what's important. Jotting down what you have to do isn't enough, especially if it's scattered on sticky notes.

You also need more than a list of what needs to be done. The most important part of time management is identifying what's important: to you, your boss, your staff and the organization. Use that to decide what to tackle, and do it when you have your best boost of energy, such as first thing in the morning.

6. Stop working in crisis mode. If it seems like you're always putting out fires, here are some tips to stop that cycle:

- **Set realistic deadlines.** Many crises occur because people rush through their work to make tight deadlines. So, when you're involved in setting time frames for big projects, add a cushion to allow for emergencies that will inevitably arise.
- **Prevent recurring 'emergencies.'** If you encounter the same emergencies over and over, find a way to fix them for good. If an employee keeps making the same mistake, hold him or her accountable with a progressive-discipline deadline. If a vendor keeps getting your order wrong, start searching for a new vendor.
- **Let employees solve the problem.** Your job as manager isn't to dive in and automatically take over the moment a crisis occurs. It's usually best to guide employees to their own solutions. If you give them the opportunity to fix a problem, they'll learn how to stave off problems in the future.

11 ways to reduce the stress of your job

There's no single magic bullet that will erase your work-related stress. Instead, a series of little steps—like the ones listed here—can work even better:

1. Write everything down. Don't rely so much on your memory.
2. Allow a little margin of extra time for everything.
3. Review your standards to make sure they are not unrealistic. Perfectionism breeds stress.
4. Always have a "Plan B" to fall back on if "Plan A" doesn't work out.
5. Organize your desk before leaving each evening. Put the most important job on top, so that you can focus on it first thing in the morning.
6. Don't lug around a full briefcase with material you don't need. It's not good for your back or your outlook.
7. Focus on using the resources you have instead of complaining about the resources you lack.
8. Tackle your toughest task in the first 10 minutes on the job.
9. Give yourself deadlines; start early and stick to them.
10. Set realistic goals for each day.
11. Question the purpose of meetings. If possible, find an alternative way to distribute information.