



Real-World Time Management, Part 1

Managing Time Is Not the Problem

*Managing yourself begins with a
change of mindset*

Tim Stevenson

IF YOU ASK business professionals to name their greatest challenge, the reply you'll hear over and over is, "Time management."

While the term is commonly used, "time management" is a misnomer. No one can manage time. It comes at us sixty minutes an hour, twenty-four hours a day. It is the same for everyone and no one can change it. The actual challenge is not managing time. It is managing *ourselves*.

The world today is the knowledge-based economy that Peter Drucker predicted for

decades. Unlike industrial-age workers with a supervisor looking over their shoulder and managing every move, knowledge workers must be largely *self-managing* in their use of time toward their most important objectives. This points directly at the root of the problem: *An attitude.*

The problem: "Passive Reactivity"

The root of the problem is an attitude I call **passive reactivity**. People step into the current of their jobs in the morning and are swept away. All day long, they *react* to people and circumstances rushing at them. They accept a helpless attitude about the relentless onslaught of other people's urgencies and circumstances.

After ten or more hours of constant activity, they step out of the current and think: "I've been running all day. I've worked hard. But what do I have to show for it in terms of real accomplishment?" Too often, the answer is "precious little"; sometimes "nothing." That's discouraging enough. How much more when they don't see any way out of their hamster-wheel experience.



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As an executive coach and leadership developer working in a wide variety of companies, I have seen this everywhere. The good news is that you can do better than this. You don't have to accept this as your unchangeable reality. To improve it, however, you must attack it at the root by choosing to become an **empowered agent**.

The attitude adjustment

To be an empowered agent means you reject the helpless victim attitude. You determine to take as much control of your time and activities as you can and direct them toward your most important functions.

Right away, many fall back on the helpless victim stance, because they think of all the things they have no choice over: Directives from the boss, mandated meetings, organizational requirements, interruptions from coworkers, and so on.

Those are obvious realities. Let's face the truth: No one has total control over their time. But that should not stop you from taking as much control *as you can*. Perfectionism is not helpful here. Neither is an "all or nothing" philosophy that says, "Unless I get complete control of my time, it isn't worth doing anything."

All or nothing thinking is ridiculous. If you could get, say, 20% more discretionary time to use as you see fit, wouldn't that be worth doing? Imagine the possibilities.

The goal: "Working at the top of your license"

In my leadership and executive coaching practice, I have worked extensively in the world of medicine with physicians and executives. From the physicians I learned a

useful concept that transfers as a metaphor to any profession, called "working at the top of your license."

Physicians and other providers have a literal license that defines the procedures they are authorized to perform, a window of their potential activities. It might range from state-of-the-art surgery at the top to taking a patient's blood pressure or having them step on a scale at the bottom.

Is a surgeon capable of performing those lower-level activities? Of course, but *should* they? Is taking a patient's blood pressure a wise use of a surgeon's time, expertise, education, and training? Further, think of the question from an economic standpoint. Do you want to pay someone \$1,000 an hour to take patients' blood pressure? Or would you rather pay a medical assistant \$12 an hour to do the same?

That's why there is a constant drum beat in the world of medicine to get all practitioners — from physicians, to nurse practitioners, to registered nurses, and so on — working in the upper regions of their license. It is too important for medical outcomes to achieve the highest benefits they can bring. And it simply makes good economic sense.

The concept applied to you

This concept applies metaphorically to any profession. Whatever you do, you also have a window of potential activities to which you can devote your time and energies. You could be working in the upper regions of your window, devoting significant portions of your weekly schedule to your most important functions. Or you could be frittering away huge amounts of time and energy doing things of little value.

Let's take Sharon, a CEO I've worked with. Like all chief executives, she is responsible for the effectiveness and results of her entire organization. Is she capable of running copies,

going to the office supply store, or emptying trash? Of course, but that's not the question.

This isn't a matter of "being too good" to do lesser activities. It is simply a recognition of the weightier responsibilities she bears and the necessity of staying focused on those.

Working at the top of your license is another way of describing the pursuit of **effectiveness**. My definitions: *Efficiency* is "doing things right" (easier, quicker, cheaper). **Effectiveness is "doing the right things."**

Think of it like the familiar 80/20 rule: 80% of your results are produced by 20% of your activities. That 20% represents the top of your license. That must be your emphasis.

Whatever the company or industry, I routinely find professionals who are working somewhere in the mid-range of their window or below. They are not being nearly as focused or effective as they could be.

Why is this? Habit is a big reason. People simply keep doing what they have always done, not recognizing that their jobs and responsibilities have expanded incrementally over time. The other major reason is that passive-reactive attitude toward work I mentioned earlier. If you are not intentional in your use of time and efforts, your activities will almost always be determined by forces outside of your control.

Much of the difficulty comes from the onslaught of other people's urgencies — demands on your time where someone else needs something "right away." Is it important in your world? No, but you feel constrained to drop what you are doing for them.

Identifying the top of your "license"

Thinking time is essential. There is simply no way to get significant control of your time and activities without a plan. It starts with identifying the top of your license:

1. Make a list of the most important functions and results for which you are responsible. Think in broad categories, not a 20-point list. Also, remember that if you are in a leadership role, giving time and attention to your people is part of the top of your license.
2. List activities in the "important but not urgent" category (my term for these is "Quadrant 4"). Include things like long-term projects, team development, and — easily ignored — self-maintenance. Because these Quadrant 4 activities do not flash a red "urgent" light, they can be put off indefinitely. The bottom line: If you don't deliberately *plan* to do them, you probably won't get around to them at all.

The sum of these two lists will constitute the top of your license. It is often wise here to run your thoughts by your immediate superior to make sure you're on the same page.

Attack the passive-reactive mindset

Your chief enemy is the passive-reactive mindset, a helpless victim attitude toward work. People tend to complain and gripe about it, yes, but they don't take the controls.

Face reality: Who on this planet is concerned for your schedule? For your priorities? For your plan? Who is going to ride in on a white stallion to protect your priorities and enable you to be effective?

No one.

Don't play the helpless victim card. Determine to take as much control over your activities as humanly possible.

With that attitude adjustment and some thinking time, we'll go on to address Step 2 in my next article through "Schedule Sculpting."

