

Never Enough Time

What if there were an alternative to to-do lists, one which focuses you on what's important and lets you dump the rest?

By Paul Lemberg

It's a cliché of executive life: You don't have time to do everything. Whether you use little slips of paper, a planner, scheduling software, or a palm pilot, all attempts at time management fail. Rather than throwing in the towel, you need a new frame of reference. Change your focus from time management to priority management.

Create a List of Priorities

Your strategic plan should highlight your priorities. The word *priority* is derived from *prior*, meaning before, and related to the Latin *primus*, meaning first. Your list of priorities should contain all the items of first importance — only the items critical to developing your organization, and nothing else. Answer the question, “What's most important to accomplish in this time frame?” Make those priorities explicit; write them out. Keep your list prominently posted by your desk.

Rethink Your To-Do List

If you're like most people, your to-do list is a hodgepodge of everything you've thought about doing now and in the future, ordered simply by when you thought it. Perhaps you write little letters or numbers next to each “task” and cross out what's done. Your list grows and grows — you re-write it only when it becomes unreadable. Throw it away!

Focus on the List of Seven

Start fresh every day. Today's list, written today for today, should contain no more than seven items. Based on your priorities, list today's most important item first, and so on. Each item on the list must advance a critical issue in your



Change your focus from time management to priority management.

organization. If it doesn't, remove it from your list. If you still think it's important, but not that important, delegate it to someone else.

Put your energies into doing the first task on your list until it's complete. Only then, move on to the second item. You may not complete today's list today — you may not even complete item one — but if you've spent the day advancing your highest priority, you've been productive.

Tomorrow, make a fresh list on a fresh sheet of paper or its computer equivalent. Don't automatically carry anything over. Starting a new list will force you to freshly evaluate what's important. If you have multiple “highest priority” tracks to follow, break up the available time into fixed time slots, and advance several priorities at once.

Re-think Meetings and Rituals

Each day brings scheduled and ad-hoc meetings, walk-ins, sit-downs, and emergencies. Plus, you have daily rituals — answering e-mail, your half-hour reading, or making

calls. Evaluate each meeting and ritual against your highest priorities. If it doesn't address your priorities, don't do it. Don't participate. Give it up. Delegate it away. The time remaining after meetings and rituals is available for your most precious priorities. Don't squander it!

Evaluate Your Progress

At the end of each week, match your accomplishments against your list of strategic priorities. Check to see that you're making progress with all your objectives — that all your priorities are moving forward. Don't let key areas languish.

There may still not be enough time for everything, but the things that are critical to your organization will get done. Everything else can wait. ■

It's All About Balance

Use these *Nonprofit World* articles (www.snpo.org/members) to help set the right priorities and make the best use of time in your organization:

- **A New Way to Evaluate Your Organization's Performance: Measure Your Use of Time** (Vol. 19, No. 4)
- **What to Do Next** (Vol. 24, No. 1)
- **In Search of the Balanced Leader** (Vol. 16, No. 6)
- **Eight Ways to Improve Leadership Team Meetings** (Vol. 23, No. 3)

Paul Lemberg is president of Quantum Growth Coaching, a coaching franchise system for entrepreneurs (<http://www.quantumgrowthcoachingfranchise.com>) and executive director of the Stratamax Research Institute, a coaching and consulting firm.