

Managing your most precious resource



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With many of us today choosing to be connected 24/7 via mobile devices, the ability to prudently manage the barrage of inputs vying for our attention is key.

This becomes ever more critical as the degree of personal discretion increases on how people spend their time on the job.

Thus, it's considerably more important that a sales manager is skilled at prioritizing than assembly line workers whose shifts are essentially planned for them by the work arriving in their respective workstation.

Thus, the epitome of folks requiring super time management and prioritization skills is the senior leader and especially the leader of a start-up. It's tough enough raising capital for a start-up, and there's an infinite amount of capital in the world. Try borrowing time. We each get 24 hours per day. Period.

By definition, start-up leaders are faced with the time management perfect storm:

- An almost infinite list of activities they could work on to grow their business.

- A bulls-eye on their back in terms of others wanting a piece of their attention; for example, an army of salespersons demanding to extol the virtues of their product or service (each of which will no doubt practically ensure the success of their business).

- Little guidance from others on personal time decisions (there no longer is a boss they can ask for advice; they are the boss).

Fortunately, the late Stephen Covey left us with a treasure chest of principles for mastering our time, both at work and at home. While library shelves of books exist on how to get more done in a given amount of time (efficiency), Covey's classic "First Things First" is devoted to selecting the most important things to accomplish (effectiveness).

It's must reading for anyone who has ever longed for the 25th hour in a day.

Covey's basic premise is that effectiveness trumps efficiency when it comes to time management. It's ludicrous to spend time improving the efficiency of a task that doesn't have to be done in the first place.

Thus, the first step is to determine WHAT has to be accomplished.

So how does one determine and prioritize what is most important? It starts with creating a plan that includes setting specific goals.

Unfortunately, in life and in business we cannot simply do goals. Typically, we can only complete activities that make a goal attainable: Saving for retirement, practicing a musical instrument to reach a certain level of expertise or training to finish a race in a specific time.

Thus, by defining and prioritizing the detailed activities that most strongly support company goals — or personal goals in terms of our time away from work — we can determine how to make the most effective use of our available time.

These top priorities, therefore, need to be scheduled with specific times carved out for them on our calendar. Covey lobbies for this exercise of identifying and scheduling the most important tasks (what he calls the "big rocks") to become a weekly habit.

Creating this proactive plan, prior to entering the daily battle, puts us in a position to make much wiser time management choices. But let's be honest, the world doesn't give a rip about our proactive plan. That caller wants 15 minutes of your time right now to explain why a listing in the Yellow Pages is the answer to your sales prayers.

Covey explains that the demands for our time can be classified by two factors: importance and urgency. He places time demands in four different quadrants:

- **Quadrant I:** Important and Urgent (responding to a key customer's complaint).

- **Quadrant II:** Important but Not Urgent (creating a strategic plan).

- **Quadrant III:** Not Important but Urgent (responding to a phone survey during election season).

- **Quadrant IV:** Not Important and Not Urgent (reading every email received).

We want importance and not urgency to be the primary driver in how we spend our time. But urgency possesses an alluring siren call, frequently suckering us to believe a demand also is important (Quadrant I) when it is really just urgent (Quadrant III).

Covey's research shows that top performing organizations spend a significantly higher percentage of time in Quadrants I and II, in the high importance region. As a leader, that's where you need to be, too.

RICK THINKS ...

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