

# Four Cornerstones of Time Management

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It's sometimes said that *our time is our life*. So, when considering the subject of time management, it's good to think beyond the usual diary hacks and techniques, and to ask deeper questions regarding how we make our everyday choices, and how our routines and habits shape our personal effectiveness and impact our colleagues.

In pre-modern times, cornerstones would determine the shape, scope and design of the structure, as well as providing core stability. The following cornerstones of time management are intended to enable a life lived well and a career worked well. While each one has its distinctive qualities and unique challenges, it's in the combination of all four that effectiveness and fulfilment lie.

## Preparation

While this may seem the most obvious point regarding time management, it is probably the area most overlooked and avoided, where the greatest dividends often result. Not just time saved, but in terms of boosting energy and morale.

We intuitively know the principle that 'time spent in preparation saves time in execution'. Anyone who has ever found themselves running to the shop to buy ingredients for a meal, that might have been anticipated had they taken a moment to look at the recipe, will know this! And yet, if we're honest with ourselves, we recognise that many of us don't get the same buzz from planning and thinking ahead as from reacting and putting out fires. In fact, for some of us, preparation can create real discomfort, which we'd rather avoid. Preparation and planning sit in the 'important / non-urgent' box in Covey's famous 2x2 matrix, a category for which many of us feel we don't have time.

A simple example from organisational life. For many of us, meetings place the greatest demand on work time, and yet how many of them feel like an inefficient use, or even a waste of time – not to mention the negative impact on collective motivation when they are not run well! Two simple techniques:

1. Remove the word *discuss* from meeting agendas, replacing it with *decide*, and state clearly the decision required. (This requires preparation.) If a decision isn't needed, consider dropping the item. Also, note the boost in energy in the group when a decision is made, even if it's not what everybody wanted.
2. Every invitation to a meeting should also be an invitation to prepare. Include against key agenda items key questions for participants to ask themselves in advance, which will then facilitate the pace and energy of the meeting.

## Delegation

When coaching, I sometimes invite leaders to consider which conversations with their team members would be different if they knew they would be out of contact with them for an extended period. The enquiry highlights three important issues.

First it focuses the mind on the *clarity* with which the leader is, or is not, articulating their longer-term aspirations for the direction and culture of the team. Even imagining taking an absence of a year or two can stimulate serious thought about the kind of organisation they would want it to be on

their return, and to be less inclined to leave things to chance! Instead, they are encouraged to create clarity about their desired direction and culture, and to start to include these aspirations in everyday communications. For example, how do they want meetings to be run, what principles should govern collaboration with other teams, how should young talent be developed, what's the client experience to be like, and so on.

Second, it raises the issue of stepping out of doing the *thinking* themselves. An extended absence would require the setting of clear objectives and guiderails, and then 100% trust in the competence and initiative of the team. It's been said that if you're not delegating the *thinking* you're probably not really delegating! For many technically oriented leaders, it can be profoundly difficult to stay out of the details, especially as the *thinking* and the problem solving is exactly what drew them to the profession in the first place. Yet this is exactly the discipline needed to develop the next generation of leaders, and to free up oneself for the activities of senior leadership.

Third, and closely related to the above, to be absent can create the profoundest discomfort around loss of *control*. For so many of us it feels easier to do things ourselves. We get to avoid any worry that others won't deliver on time or to our standards, we don't have to confront low commitment levels from individuals, and we maintain a sense of our own value by keeping busy. The comfort-blanket of control may be the hardest of all three to address. I've observed that often it's only when the leader physically *cannot* stay involved due to other commitments, that they are forced to trust the team, and that they finally relinquish control. Which leads to point 3, saying 'no':

## Saying 'No'

Is the real problem here saying 'no', or is it making a commitment to a robust 'yes'?

Take the example of a festival like Christmas. A majority of Europeans and North Americans, other than emergency and critical care workers, would find it easy to say no if asked to work at Christmas, presumably because they have already fully committed to time off with family or community. The principle is this. When we make concrete commitments to what matters most, and most critically, other people are involved, then we can leave our calendars to do the heavy lifting, as it were. Once we make such shared commitments to long-term projects, strategic leadership activities, professional development, relationships, health, recreation, then 'busy work' will find less room to creep in.

Without discipline in this area, priorities often slide, almost imperceptibly, towards reactivity. We can end up spending more and more evenings at the office, or constantly checking emails over the weekend. The need to review the degree to which our professed commitments correspond with our actual habits and behaviours doesn't end, and many of us are helped by a close friend or partner who is willing to speak the uncomfortable truths.

Of course, requests still arise, and saying 'no' can be difficult, especially for those of us who don't like the feeling of disappointing others. The following can help with the discomfort of saying no:

1. Take an intentional pause between the request and the response, saying simply to yourself, or out-loud if appropriate, 'Thanks for asking, but I need to first check my existing commitments.' Avoiding knee-jerk 'yeses' can save a lot of grief further down the track, and indicates to the other that you take your commitments seriously.
2. To the degree that it's possible, demonstrate your support and understanding to the *person* even while giving a clear no to the *task*. The 'no' should not become a rejection of them (which can easily happen), but rather of the thing itself.

3. Notice any tendency to be over-optimistic with what you can achieve. How often, for example, do tasks and projects take longer than you anticipated? For many of us, the answer is often! I like the notion from author David Allen of a *commit-to-do* list, as opposed to the usual *want-to-do (when I have time)* list. The daily *commit-to-do* list includes a maximum of one or possibly two discrete tasks from the important but non-urgent category to commit to each day.

It's worth remembering that we expect capable professionals to be in demand, and to have boundaries. A builder who is instantly available every time we call might soon raise doubts about their quality. Similarly, people respect those who know their limits, honour their commitments, and protect their focus.

## Being Concrete

Vagueness is one of the biggest causes of lost time in the workplace. Emails with unclear intent, meetings with woolly objectives, projects with ambiguous scope – all consume time, produce little, and tend to dampen morale.

Why do we drift into vagueness? Because clarity takes courage. To be concrete with ourselves and with others risks disappointment, disagreement, even rejection. It can feel easier to soften our words and leave things open-ended. Yet this false comfort carries a heavy cost in wasted time and diluted effort.

Concreteness does not mean controlling every detail. It means distinguishing between *what* must be delivered and *how* it is achieved. The *what* – deliverables, scope, budget, timelines, constraints – usually belongs to the leader. The *how* can often be left to the creativity and autonomy of the individual. This distinction between the *what* and *how*, or in other words between destination and route, allows leaders to provide the clarity that saves time and aligns effort, while still leaving space for ownership and innovation.

## Conclusion

Time management is more than efficiency tricks. It's about clarity, commitment and courage. Preparation reduces waste and boosts energy. Delegation develops others and frees leaders to lead. Saying no protects our yeses, anchoring life in what matters most. And concreteness saves time lost to drift and misunderstanding. Together, these cornerstones create a structure that supports not just productive work, but calm, confident and purposeful lives.

Peter Young, August 2025