

My Personal Coach trainer

My business experience has taught me one true thing: That maximizing your productivity, happiness, peace, or impact can best be accomplished if you clearly understand the 12 Rules of Time.

1. Have goals

Being more efficient with your time is irrelevant if you don't know how you want to spend it. In managing time, the compass is more important than the clock. Know where you want to go and spend your time on the things that get you there.

Many people spend energy trying to be more efficient without first doing what's important: setting goals. It's like being lost on your way to a new city. Driving faster doesn't help if you are going in the wrong direction. Figure out what direction to go in and head that way.

Once you've prepared it, your list of goals will reveal what is important to you.

2. Analyze how you spend your time

It is always good to know how you're spending your time right now. You can track this by setting a timer to go off every 15 minutes; whenever it sounds, write down exactly what you are doing. Alternatively, divide your day into 15-minute blocks and record each activity you do.

Once you have your time logs, examine them. How do they compare to your goals? Are you spending time where your priorities are?

3. Keep a to-do list

This sounds too simple, but it really is the basis of all time-management systems. Your to-do list can be electronic, on fancy paper, bound in a notebook or loose-leaf. The key is to have everything you want to accomplish on one list. My to-do list might have a one-line item on it, such as "write annual report," which refers me to a much larger file or even a file box on that item.

4. Prioritize your list

Once you have the list, determine which are the most important items. Mark these with a highlighter, a red pen, or in any other way that makes them stand out.

I sometimes find my to-do list is too big. Every item on the list calls out "pay attention to me!", even though most of them weren't highlighted as important. In these cases, I take a blank sheet of paper and cover my to-do list and write down only the three or four most important items. Those are the ones to focus on.

5. Control procrastination

I use a number of tricks to break any lingering tendencies to procrastinate. For instance, I happen to like having a hard copy of my digital to-do list. I reprint it every few days as new items are added and completed ones dropped. It is at these times that I look for the items that I've marked as high priority, but which are just not getting done.

People often say I have great self-control. In truth, though, much of it is environment control. I control my environment to eliminate things that I might use to procrastinate. Take games off your computer, for example, sell your TV, and get rid of the busywork jobs that you use to avoid the important tasks.

I have developed one effective habit that has helped break me of procrastination: "Do the worst thing first." At the beginning of every day, I do the one task that is causing me the most stress, and that I haven't been getting done. Sometimes I just give it a quarter of an hour — based on the theory that I can stand just about anything for 15 minutes. Frequently it is this short thrust that breaks me through.

If I still find myself procrastinating, I review my reasons for setting a goal. To create extra motivation to complete a task, I strengthen the reasons why it should be done. Similarly, many people reward themselves for completing a job.

6. Organize

Organization and time management are linked. I find that I get important things done when I have all the tools I need to perform the job.

The opposite of organization — chaos, clutter, disorganization — generally leads to busy work. If your desk is piled high, every piece of paper says "look at me." You can end up doing a lot of work without ever getting to the important stuff.

7. Delegate

One way to expand your time is to get others to help you with it. The key to delegation is to hand off any tasks that someone else can do significantly faster or more easily than you can.

If you're protesting that you don't have anyone working directly for you to whom you can delegate tasks, no problem. Consider delegating to a peer, a superior, a supplier, or even a customer. Treat delegation like networking: who in your network would be best for the job?

In some cases you will need to invest up-front to train someone so he or she can take over a task from you. The long-term savings are usually worth the up-front time and costs.

After delegation, remember to thank appropriately. You might think people would resent being delegated to, but exactly the opposite is true. People like to be asked, especially if it is to do something that they're good at.

8. Master efficiency tricks

The best trick I have found is "The Power of While." What can you do while you drive? While you walk? While you clean? While you watch TV? I am a huge audio tape advocate and frequently listen to tapes while I am doing something else.

Being a techno person, I love all the organization software out there that allows me to keep my contacts, to-do lists and appointments. I also use gadgets such as cellphones, wireless e-mail, and personal digital assistants. Good use of technology can save you valuable time.

9. Its OK to say no

Saying "No" can be the most powerful time tool you can master. When someone asks you to do something, ask yourself how important this is. Does it help you achieve your goals? Is this a task you would be better at than most people? Don't always look for reasons to get out of things, but be strategic about what you take on.

This doesn't mean that I always say no when asked to help out. But if I do say no, I am always polite and tactful, and try to suggest someone else who would do the job well.

10. Focus

Committing 100% focus and concentration on one task at a time can be very powerful. Eliminate distractions. Focus on the task. When you're properly organized and prepared, when your energy and power are high, you can often complete a task in 20% of the time it would take when you're distracted or open to interruption.

11. Build your efficiency bank

High efficiency is not possible if you don't look after yourself. Eat right, exercise, sleep well and drink moderately. Mom knew best: all the things she said were good for you just happen to be best for your efficiency, too.

I also believe meditation can be a great way of building your efficiency. It could be transcendental meditation, Zen, or just finding a way to get into a relaxed state that lets you focus on the task you have to do. No matter how you do it, recharging your batteries gives you the power to do more during the times you need to be at your best.

12. Take care of yourself

It isn't possible to be "on" all the time. Take the time you need to look after yourself — body and soul — so that you can reach peak efficiency when you need to. Have a list of things you like to do. Find out what activities energize you, and spend more time doing them. This will give you the power and energy to be more productive when you return to work.

Finally, a word of advice. If after reading this far you're feeling a bit overwhelmed, I suggest you go back to Rule 1 and add peace (contentment) to your list of goals. Time management is not about adding stress; it is about giving you the time to be the person you really want to be.