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# Time management reminders to myself

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## Time Management Reminders to Myself

By Roben Torosyan, PhD

Slow down and remember this: Most things make no difference. *Being busy is a form of laziness—lazy thinking and indiscriminate action.* ... Being selective—doing less—is the path of the productive. Focus on the important few and ignore the rest. ... It's easy to get caught in a flood of minutiae, and the key to not feeling rushed is remembering that *lack of time is actually lack of priorities.*<sup>1</sup>

- Begin with the end in mind.<sup>2</sup>
- o I often feel so dissatisfied at the end of the day or week. Like I didn't get much done. It helps if I instead first figure out what matters most to me—the big picture, what I really want to “accomplish” or even “become”—and have such big, aggressive goals guiding me.
- First things first.
- o *Focus most time on the important and not urgent. That's the planning, prevention, and systems work.*

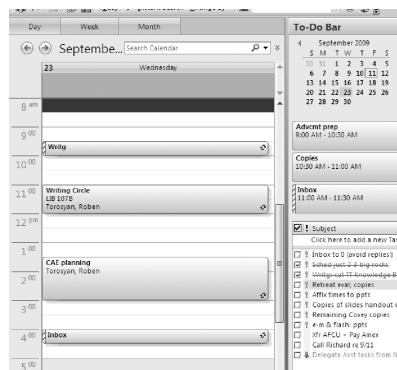
	Urgent	Not Urgent
<b>Important</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crises</li> <li>• Pressing issues</li> <li>• Deadlines</li> <li>• Mandated meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparing, putting systems in place</li> <li>• Planning the day, week, month, year</li> <li>• Preventing crises &amp; interruptions, proactively</li> <li>• Build relationships before they're needed</li> </ul>
<b>Unimportant</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many interruptions</li> <li>• Some mail</li> <li>• Many popular activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trivia &amp; timesinks</li> <li>• Some calls</li> <li>• Excessive games/ TV</li> </ul>

- o Rank tasks in order of importance, and squeeze in the less important stuff when you can get to it.
- Don't just list priorities; schedule them.
- o Keep your planner, not your email, in front of you. Lists tend to nag at you and grow ever longer. Schedule the biggest priorities for times when you're at your *peak energy*; see the time blocked out on your calendar and you'll have a visual symbol and reminder of what your goals are for the day.
- o When trying to finish a task, you may slow down. Set a timer or alarm for a scheduled priority to keep on task. Snooze it as you must, but use it to get things done and move on.
- Schedule only two or three “big rocks.”
- o Big rocks story: An efficiency expert filled a 5-gallon tank with big rocks and asked, “Is it full?” People said, “Yes.” He replied, “Wrong,” and poured small rocks in around the

bigger ones. He asked, “Is it full now?” People said, “Maybe.” He replied, “Wrong again.” He took tiny pebbles and filled in the spaces. He asked, “Is it full now?” Catching on, people said, “No.” He said, “Right,” and filled in the rest with water. Someone asked, “What's the point? That no matter how much you do, you can always do more?” The presenter replied, “Wrong. Put the big rocks in first, and everything else falls into place. Do what matters most each day *first*, and the other stuff will get done or fall into place.”

- o Ask yourself, three times a day, “Am I inventing things to do in order to avoid the important?” (Ferriss, *The 4-Hour Work Week*, p. 80).

- Keep your planner, not your email, in front of you.
- o I often let myself get distracted by the latest unimportant email, despite my priorities for the day. If I instead keep seeing my plan and goals, then I'm continually reminded of what matters most.



- (For me, I set up Outlook Calendar to view time blocks and the To-Do Bar—but any other planner that suits your visual preferences will do.)
- o For any task, specify the most concrete next step. Rather than setting the task as “Write up report” and taking hours to do it, I put “Start jotting report notes” and give myself just a half hour (often setting a kitchen timer to move me along). This breaks large projects into small, concrete steps that feel satisfying along the way.
  - Leave unimportant email or tasks for when you're tired.
  - o I find unimportant emails to be my single worst time sink. I get too many, most are unimportant, and I usually don't even realize their unimportance it's too late.
  - o I find I do best if I treat most email as a quick and dirty communication device, and don't get hung up on crafting every detail.
  - o For my personal rhythms, this means it's best if I leave email until late in the day, when I've worked on my big rocks already.

## RECOVERING FROM FAILURE... From Page 5

other lessons that you don't want to learn in this type of situation. For instance, you don't want to conclude that your institution isn't ready for change or can't adjust to bold new ideas. You don't want to decide that you're really better at sustaining current programs than developing new ideas. You don't want to come away from this experience believing that the very next thing you try has to be a *huge* success—or else. None of those lessons is going to help your program succeed or allow you to put the failure behind you. What you *do* want to learn is why that one specific endeavor didn't work and how you can avoid similar obstacles in the future. Was there a way in which you could have taken more time to build consensus about the idea before your implementation got under

way? Were there factors ultimately beyond your control that you need to consider as contingencies for future initiatives? Was there a divergence between your vision and that of your supervisor—one that you'll need to resolve before beginning your next project? In other words, the lessons you need to learn from a mistake are those that will help you succeed in the future, not those that will make you more reluctant to try or that will lead to further disappointments.

### **Distinguish between your résumé and your self-worth**

The more we care about our jobs, the more we tend to take our failures personally. But it's important to distinguish between taking a failure seriously and obsessing over it. There's your job, and then there's you. They're not the same. You may have had a major set-

back in your work, but that doesn't diminish your value as a person. In other words, you've had a failure; it's not that you are a failure. Our résumés are a list of what we've done, not a guide to who we are. So, accept both successes and failures with good grace. Plenty of each will come your way, but neither defines your complete identity or the many roles you play in the lives of others.

*Jeffrey L. Buller is dean of the Harriet L. Wilkes Honors College at Florida Atlantic University. He is the author of The Essential Department Chair: A Practical Guide to College Administration (2006), The Essential Academic Dean: A Practical Guide to College Leadership (2007), and The Essential College Professor: A Practical Guide to an Academic Career (2010). All are published by Jossey-Bass. ▼*

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- Chunk tasks together, like with like.
  - o To crank through tasks quickly, get into a momentum with similar work. So, handle most emails all at once. But moreover, handle all your in-box at once, and then all those requiring action at once, and then all emails requiring reading at once, and so forth.
  - o Likewise, run through calls one after another, so that when you're at the phone, or walking and using your cell, you are cued by your system to get it all done at once.
- Process email quickly.
  - o Run down your in-box by filing in groups: Act/Reply, Read 1 Day, Handled Archive, Delete.
  - o Likewise, I get into a momentum with Act/Reply tasks, so that I often take only two to five minutes each, because I'm in "crank through" mode.
  - o Cultivate selective ignorance and tolerance for incompleteness

(Ferriss, p. 82). And remember, as Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "There are many things of which a wise man might wish to be ignorant." (Emerson in Ferriss, p. 83).

- Stop procrastinating.
  - o As Boice argues, "You are more likely to act yourself into feeling."<sup>3</sup> (p. 72) To counteract the experience people often have of "that which can be delayed, will be," use the Priority Principle: "That which can be delayed, need not be. Decide which recurrent, daily activities you enjoy, and make them contingent on doing a valued but delayable task first." (p. 77)

Finally, for peace of mind, alternate between getting things done and enjoying the moment.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ferriss, T. (2007). *The 4-hour work week: Escape 9-5, live anywhere, and join the new rich*. New York: Random House/Crown.

<sup>2</sup> Slim summary: Covey, S. R. (2003). *The 7 habits of highly effective people personal workbook*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

<sup>3</sup> Boice, R. (1990). *Professors as writers: A self-help guide to productive writing*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press. p. 72

<sup>4</sup> Rigorous: Lyubomirsky, S. (2008). *The how of happiness: A scientific approach to getting the life you want*. New York: Penguin.