

# Time management

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# The principles of effective time management

Anita Devi explores some fundamental principles that underpin a personalised time management system that works for you.

Professional wellbeing in the workplace happens when leaders create the right cultural context for it to be a high priority and individuals equally take responsibility for their own health. It requires leadership and introspection.

Check out these tried and tested principles of an effective time management approach. There isn't a 'one size fits all' answer and our personality type and personal identity, plus our individual life circumstances, will affect what approach we use and how. Nonetheless there are a few fundamental principles that, if applied to develop a personalised approach, can support growth in this area.

## Who you are makes all the difference

We are all different, so it is important to develop clarity about our personal identity. The clearer we are on our identities, the better we are at making personal choices.

Our identity cuts across many aspects of our life – family, work, relationships, community, social interests and other networks. Too often, we define ourselves by what we do, rather than who we are.

### Activity 1: This is me!

- A. Divide a sheet of A4 paper into three and fill in these lists.

What is important to you, across all areas of your life	What others think about you	How best to support you
<i>To help you develop your perspective and priorities.</i>	<i>Contact five people you trust and feel comfortable with. Ask them to describe you through three positive attributes or qualities.</i>	<i>Use positive and affirmative sentences</i>

- B. 'Because I'm worth it': jot down your responses to the following.
- What does professional wellbeing mean to me?
  - What are the tell-tale signs when I am stressed?
  - What currently concerns me and who can I share these things with?

### Activity 2: Control and beyond control

Dump the mental baggage! Look at the list of things that concern you: can you classify them into areas of control (AoC) and areas beyond control (ABC)?

Part of knowing yourself is being clear on your levels of influence. These can change over time with responsibility and through professional development. However, too often we carry things around that are in our ABC zone.

### **Activity 3: Me time! Personal reflection**

'Me time' here is defined as personal space to just be, not do.

- Are you a morning person or a burn the night oil person?
- Is your choice based on habit, preference or optimum performance?
- How do you recognise your optimum energy levels to complete a task?
- How much 'me time' do you need/would you like in a day?
- How much 'me time' are you currently getting?

### **Task lists don't work, but activity lists do!**

Most people get a lot of pleasure from ticking something off on a list. I know colleagues who write lists at the start of the day and then tick off as they go along. Others complete an action, write it down and then tick it off. Psychologically, there appears to be something quite gratifying about lists and ticking them off. We are effective when we let who we are determine and drive what we do.

However, the problem with lists is they are linear and our brains don't work in a linear way. We are wired to be dynamic, responsive and connected – we have circular and interconnected thoughts e.g. 'If I do this, then...oh but if this happens then...' and so on. A list does not always reflect the multitude and complexity of our thoughts and the action steps required to complete a task. Inevitably, we always underestimate the time a task can take.

Top tip: When you insert a meeting time in your diary, do you insert planning and prep time as well? Or do you stay up late the night before prepping for the meeting? Blocking off prep time at the point at which you book the meeting ensures it is in the diary and you have time. Depending on the format you use, most lists do not always help to prioritise. If you work down the list you might get three things done in a day and then realise item four was the most important. When things come up unexpectedly, how do you decide to shelve other things? These decisions add to our mental processing load. It is like having a programme constantly running in the background of your computer that takes up space and slows you down.

### **Responding, not reacting**

Finally, the tragedy of task lists is they never end. You sent the email = tick! Then you get a reply with another question, which means another email and another task. Does it go to the bottom of the list or does it jump in and distract you from other tasks you are currently doing? What if you have no time left that week?

Ever sent an instant reply to an email and then thought: 'I should have said xyz' which actually means writing another email tomorrow? Sometimes, by reacting in the moment we create additional work for ourselves. Obviously there are times when an immediate response is required, but not always.

Hopefully, you will now begin to see how task lists don't work for the complex roles and lives we now live in. So what's the solution? The answer lies in activity lists. What's the difference?

Tasks are endless, but activities begin to group tasks together and when combined with time boundaries make for an effective time management system.

### **Set boundaries**

People often talk about work-life balance. I find this a little nonsensical. Work is only one part of life. Also, if we focus on work-life balance, we are never going to achieve and sustain the perfect combination. Life happens!

Boundaries are different to barriers. Boundaries establish a perimeter, but you can still let people in and be flexible. By contrast, barriers define no-go areas, walls of blockage. Healthy relationships use boundaries to make the expectations of a relationship clear. Time management is in effect a relationship with time.

### **Nothingness time is not a luxury, but a necessity**

How many of us cram so much into our diaries that when unexpected events occur, we have to drop something and then end up with a backlog? Suddenly our to-do lists become never-ending catch-up lists.

To counteract this, mark off half an hour a day in your diary structure as nothingness time i.e. a defined period when you insert nothing in.

Where you place nothingness time in your day's structure is up to you and dependent on your personal circumstances.

Unexpected events don't happen every day so eventually you get to a point where you have an extra half an hour!

Some people who use this approach timetable in nothingness time once a week during their non-contact time. Others who teach full time use before or after school hours. Depending on your role, level of responsibility, work contract and circumstances, when and how you allocate this time will differ. The point is to include it on a regular basis and guard the time boundaries you set.

### **Regular review and refinement is essential**

Back in the 80s, the Filofax era, companies were continuously advertising time management tools for life. But our circumstances constantly change and our roles evolve. Therefore, key aspects of any time management system are reviewing and refining

I have successfully maintained two golden rules for my time management because I annually take time out to review and reflect on what's working and what's not working. I then (keeping hold of the underlying principles) adapt and adjust my approach.

I have two golden rules.

- My work day ends at 5pm.
- I don't work weekends.

# Prioritising your time: matrix for change

What makes a task important, and how can you avoid putting off those tasks that you just don't want to face right now? Nickii Messer shows how the prioritisation matrix can be of help

Being good at managing your own time is crucial to not only dealing with your workload well, but also ensuring all your staff are working to an optimal level so that you have a productive, happy and high-functioning team. A key skill in managing your time is being able to identify what constitutes 'important' when planning how to complete your core tasks.

## What is important?

For a school leader, important activities will contribute to the school's purpose or mission – its vision for learning. Urgent means that the activity is pressing and must take place now or imminently. In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey advocated a prioritisation matrix (Simon & Schuster, 2004). To use the matrix, you split your workload across the quadrants. Any work that is urgent and important (quadrant 1) takes precedence followed by work in quadrant 2, which is important but not urgent. Where you have work in quadrants 3 and 4 (urgent/not important and not urgent/not important respectively) you need to take a view. If this work is not important, why is it on your desk in the first place? Is it wasting your time?

The box below gives some examples of how common tasks for SBMs fit into the prioritisation matrix, and suggests ways to manage these.

## Making use of prioritisation matrix

	Urgent	Not urgent
Important	<p><b>Quadrant 1:</b> These tasks need tackling immediately.</p> <p>Examples for SBMs: Difficult parent in reception. Fire alarm. Important meeting.</p>	<p><b>Quadrant 2:</b> These tasks are planning and improving activities.</p> <p>Examples for SBMs: Budget. Staffing review. Developing new systems.</p> <p><b>Action</b> Put time aside to complete these important activities.</p>
Not important	<p><b>Quadrant 3:</b> These tasks are often things that other people think are important and usually need doing quickly.</p> <p>Examples for SBMs:</p>	<p><b>Quadrant 4:</b> These tasks can be left until later.</p> <p>Examples for SBMs: Checking emails. Chatting.</p>

	Last-minute photocopying. Photocopier jammed. Phone calls. Late requests for ordering resources.  <b>Action</b> Create systems, training and strategies (quadrant 2!) to minimise these time-wasting interruptions.	Filing.  <b>Action</b> Some of these tasks will still need doing but consider delegating (such as filing) and structuring your time more efficiently (such as checking emails only at timetabled parts of the day).
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*Developed and adapted from Stephen Covey's prioritisation matrix in The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People (Simon & Schuster, 2004, p151)*

### **Analysing whole day's tasks**

The prioritisation matrix is also a useful tool for analysing your overall working day. If you consistently have high levels of work in the first quadrant – urgent and important – then you need to understand why and do something about it, as this will mean your time is spent being more reactive than proactive. Investing time to set up systems and procedures to prevent crises happening in the first place is time well spent, and should ultimately save you time – and stress.

You should also recognise that too much time spent on any activity can move it swiftly out of quadrant 1 and into quadrant 4! So, if you have a predisposition to keep working on something to get it perfect, discipline yourself to stop when the job is done sufficiently well.

A really useful exercise is to list all of the tasks that you do during a day and then fill in the prioritisation matrix to analyse how you have spent your time. Do you spend most of your time planning or dealing with unnecessary interruptions? Do you tend to put off quadrant 2 (planning and improving) activities, preferring to keep yourself busy with quadrant 4 tasks such as repeatedly checking emails, filing and so on?

While quadrant 1 (important and urgent) tasks clearly will need to be dealt with immediately, you should then aim to spend a good proportion of your time on the tasks that will bring greater efficiency and effectiveness to your school – those in quadrant 2. This does require discipline, and research shows us that what actually happens is that the majority of colleagues deal with tasks in the following order: quadrant 1; quadrant 3; quadrant 4 and, finally, quadrant 2. By the time you get round to the planning and improving tasks it is the end of the day, you are tired and have limited time left to give them the attention they require.

### **Managing 'elephant in the room'**

We do need to recognise that some quadrant 2 tasks can easily become an 'elephant in the room'. Just like an elephant in the room, some tasks – especially when done for the first time – can seem so impossibly onerous that they intimidate you, resulting in them being put off and other, simpler and less important tasks, being done instead. My best advice would be to 'slice the elephant'. Break the task down into bite-sized, manageable chunks and spread them over a number of days. Intersperse them with simpler, quick-win jobs to keep your morale up and give you a sense of achievement. Keeping a weekly worksheet will be invaluable here. As you chunk up the task, determine when

completion is required then work back, dividing the chunks across the days. If completion is due on Friday, set the target completion for Thursday at the latest, to allow for any unscheduled interruptions and events.

### **Using it alongside other tools**

Finally, it is wise to keep an eye on all tasks, whatever quadrant they sit in. It is easy to suddenly find that something that was previously in quadrant 3 or 4 has become elevated to quadrant 1 just because it was forgotten until the last minute. The key message here is that while this prioritisation matrix can be an invaluable tool, unless it is supported by lists, then it lacks the necessary rigour of a successful planning tool.



# Watch the clock: how to make optimal use of your time

Given the multitude of tasks that come under the SBM's remit, it is vital that you are excellent at time management. Nickii Messer offers strategies you can use to make best use of this most

To ensure that every member of your staff is being as effective as possible, you need to know that they are making optimal use of their time. You need not only to be good at managing your own time, but also ensuring all your staff have this crucial skill too. So what strategies can you use to achieve this? There are many, but we will look at some of the core strategies that have proved useful for SBMs.

## **Saying no!**

SBMs have a great many demands on their time, from a great many sources. Whether from the head, teachers, support staff colleagues, governors, local authority, there is always someone wanting a slice of your time. For many of us, it goes against the grain to turn away a request for help. So put this into context by placing a value on yourself, as a school resource.

Recognise how disruptive and timewasting interruptions are. If you are frequently interrupted you need to analyse why so that you can then determine strategies to minimise this timewasting. You might discover that there is a training need so that staff have the skills required to do the job themselves (unjamming the photocopier springs to mind) or staff may need help to become more organised to reduce last-minute requests for help.

Perhaps you need a system where requests for help are logged and passed to you electronically or an information sheet compiled for staff so they know who to go to instead. It is important to take the time to recognise what factors are causing unnecessary disruptions and timewasting in your school, so that you can then identify ways to remove these, or at least reduce their negative impact.

## **Planning**

'If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail!' - *Benjamin Franklin*

Planning your workload allows you to divide your work pile up into manageable amounts, ensuring that important tasks and deadlines are met and less important activities wait their turn. Rather than taking something from the top of the pile (or further down because it looks simpler), plan your work according to when it needs to be done, how important it is and even down to your most productive part of the day.

Try using the 'three lists of three' method. Divide your work as follows:

1. Three things that you must get done today
2. Three things that you will get done today if you have time

As an SBM, I used this method but without restricting myself to three things in each list. The overriding benefit for me was that each morning I had only one relatively small, manageable work pile to look at. Because I had organised my work, I felt in control and was unlikely to miss anything important, especially deadlines.

The LEADS method, advocated by Jones (Jones, J. Management Skills in Schools, Sage Publications Ltd, 2005) is another straightforward technique that I know a great many SBMs find useful, especially when first planning their workload. LEADS is an acronym for:

- List tasks, activities and deadlines
- Estimate time needed
- Allow time for unscheduled tasks (approx 40%)
- Decide on priorities
- Scan scheduled tasks at end of day

It requires an organised approach but you can gain far greater control over your work.

The guiding principle behind the LEADS method is that while it is essential to plan time to complete important tasks, interruptions and unexpected events will invariably occur. So, never plan more than 60% of your day.

Start by **Listing** (L) everything that you know must be done along with timescales and deadlines. Include anything that remains unfinished from the previous day along with necessary telephone calls, letters, emails and regular, daily activities.

**Estimate** (E) how long you will need to complete the listed tasks and try to eliminate interruptions.

**Allow** (A) 'buffer time' – these are the unscheduled, unexpected events that Jones suggests you should schedule an allowance of 40% of your day for.

**Decide** (D) your priorities – be absolutely clear about deadlines as well as considering what you have to do and what you might delegate instead. Finally, at the end of each day **Scan** (S) to see what remains and either tackle these tasks, reschedule them for the next day or, if they are no longer important, cancel them.

From my own experience, I used to find planning time for important tasks and projects in my diary – just as I might meetings – worked very effectively. In the same way that I wouldn't cancel a meeting unless absolutely necessary, I wouldn't allow tasks scheduled against time slots in my diary to be moved. As much as anything else, this disciplined the procrastinator in me!

Train yourself to keep your mind focused on one task, not letting your mind stray or worry about other things that are waiting to be done. Multi-tasking might seem like a useful skill, but it has been proven that we are more productive when completing one task at a time. So be disciplined and set quality time aside to get on with the projects and larger tasks that come your way.

To organise your work effectively, prioritisation is key. This involves deciding what is urgent, what is important, what can – and should – wait, and what is simply unnecessary.

### **Discipline – get on with it**

One of the worst wastes of time comes from procrastination. Procrastination results from putting something off because you don't want to do it. Be upfront with yourself as to the cause of your procrastination so you can seek the most useful solution. If you put something off until you are in a better frame of mind to do it then fair enough. But give yourself a deadline and don't let it go beyond that point.

If you procrastinate because you don't like doing the activity, then get on with it and promise yourself the incentive of a treat once it's done. If procrastination is because you are afraid of the task, then ask for support from another colleague or SBM that you network with. Procrastination not

only creates an elephant in your room – an immovable beast that dominates your skyline – but it can impact on others that rely on you to complete your part of the task: ‘Procrastination made me a bottleneck to my staff; immobilised by me, they became bottlenecks to people in other departments’ - Ken Blanchard, *The One Minute Manager* (Harper Collins, 2011, pg 47). The best advice is that if it needs to be done, do it and move on!

### **Delegation**

Time can also be wasted doing a job that someone else could, or should, be doing. Delegation is an important skill for any leader and delegating tasks and responsibility is proven to empower staff. If delegation is to save you time, then you need to understand how to delegate effectively. Selecting the right person to delegate to is the first step. You then need to make sure that you explain the task carefully and ensure that they understand exactly what is being asked of them. Offer them support initially but don’t impose your working methods on them but allow them to find their own way of completing the task. It may well be quicker to do it yourself at the outset, but that’s not the point. This is time invested and will be repaid by the colleague being empowered to take on this and other duties from you in the future.

For SBMs there is an imperative to ensure that not only are you using your own time effectively and efficiently, but that your support-staff teams are too. Colleagues can quickly become overwhelmed by workload, particularly if they are working for a number of people and having continual interruptions.

Good, supportive observation and performance management can help to identify this before it gets out of hand. As we tend to find different tools work better for us than others, so will your colleagues. So try not to impose solutions, but offer advice instead. Introduce different concepts for your colleagues to try out and show them how you make them work for you. If staff feel valued and supported, and, in turn, understand the importance of their contribution to the school, they will be far more ready to try these ideas out for themselves.

### **Recognise your worth**

We should recognise and value the invaluable resource that we are; only then can we get a sense of the importance of our time. Spending time to use methods such as Stephen Covey’s prioritisation matrix to analyse the tasks that we spend our days doing is an invaluable investment to ensure that we minimise time-wasting activities and time-wasters.

We need to be disciplined with ourselves, and with others too. Don’t let people steal your time with unnecessary interruptions, especially if they are as a result of their own inability to plan effectively. Invest time to help them to work smarter and reduce the negative impact on yourself.

Finally, remember that planning and scheduling your time doesn’t mean that you can’t take time out to go and talk to colleagues over a cup of tea. SBMs need to know their teams and be trusted by them, so factor this important time into your day too!

# Top 39 tips for effective time-management

Time management is a daily challenge for SBMs. Ineffective use of time can increase stress and decrease productivity. Use these expert tips to ensure you are using time to your advantage

1. Remember: time is your most valuable resource!
2. The challenge is not to manage time, but to manage ourselves.
3. An unmanageable workload leads to stress, which can lead to physical or mental health problems.
4. Ensure that key resources are used to best effect.
5. We all have an optimum point where we work best under a certain amount of pressure. Learn how to avoid going beyond that point.
6. Instead of worrying that we don't have enough time we should examine our workload and decide how best to manage that instead.
7. Remember that your priorities can change: something that was low on your list can start to take precedence if it is forgotten until the last minute.
8. If work is not important, why is it on your desk in the first place? Is it wasting your time?
9. If you have consistently high levels of work that is urgent and important you need to understand why and do something about it.
10. Investing time to set up systems and procedures to prevent crises happening in the first place is time well spent.
11. Don't be a perfectionist! Discipline yourself to stop when the job is done sufficiently well.
12. Aim to spend a good proportion of your time on the tasks that will bring greater efficiency and effectiveness to your school.
13. If a task seems overwhelming, slice into manageable chunks and spread the m over a number of days.
14. Set a date for when a task needs to be complete, and then set your deadline for the day before to allow for any unscheduled interruptions.
15. Never plan more than 60% of your day.
16. Use LEADS when planning your workload:
17. List tasks and deadlines
18. Estimate time needed
19. Allow time for unscheduled tasks
20. Decide on priorities: consider what you have to do and what you might delegate.
21. Scan to see what remains and either tackle these tasks, reschedule them or cancel them.
22. Multi-tasking might seem like a useful skill, but it has been proven that we are more productive when completing one task at a time.
23. If you put something off until you are in a better frame of mind to do it then fair enough.
24. If you procrastinate because you don't like doing the activity, then get on with it and promise yourself the incentive of a treat once it's done.
25. If procrastination is because you are afraid of the task, then ask for support from another colleague or SBM.
26. Procrastination can impact on others that rely on you to complete your part of the task.
27. Recognise how disruptive and timewasting interruptions are.
28. If you are frequently interrupted, analyse why so that you can then determine strategies to minimise this timewasting.
29. Learn to say, 'No'!

30. Have strict 'opening hours' during which time staff and students can visit.
31. When you feel in demand, put things into context by placing a value on yourself, as a school resource.
32. Time can also be wasted doing a job that someone else could, or should, be doing.
33. Understand how to delegate effectively. Offer support initially but don't impose your working methods on them.
34. Consider extra training for your staff so they the skills required to do certain jobs themselves (unjamming the photocopier springs to mind).
35. Staff may need help to become more organised to reduce last-minute requests for help.
36. Consider creating a system where requests for help are logged and passed to you electronically or an information sheet compiled for staff.
37. Remember you have an important role to play in helping colleagues to achieve a healthy work-life balance.
38. We should recognise and value the invaluable resource that we are; only then can we get a sense of the importance of our time.
39. Finally, remember that planning your time doesn't mean that you can't take time out to go and talk to colleagues over a cup of tea. SBMs need to know their teams and be trusted by them, so factor this important time into your day too!

*With thanks to: Nickii Messer*

# Making use of comfort-stretch-panic zones model: proformas for use in practice

**1. Make a list**

List all the jobs you do as SBM (some are included to help you get started).

<p>Inputting invoices  Placing orders  Answering queries from parents and staff  Resolving small-scale HR concerns  Sorting out low-impact premises issues  Completing end of financial year  Creating new budget  Inducting new staff, performance management  Awarding new contracts  Revising job descriptions  Overseeing projects  Presenting reports to governors  Undertaking academic qualifications  Writing a bid proposal  Chairing a meeting  Running a training session for staff</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	?	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	?
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### 2. Categorise your tasks

For each task, decide whether it is in your comfort, stretch or panic zone. Tick each one off from your list above once you’ve placed it in one of the columns in the table below.

<b>Comfort</b> (Routine job that I can do with little effort)	<b>Stretch</b> (Tasks that are possibly new to me, or ones I do infrequently, that I need to think about, but enjoy the challenge of achieving)	<b>Panic</b> (Tasks that make you feel out of your depth, under stress and unable to deliver)

### 3. Identify the root of panic

Now take one of the panic zone tasks, and identify what aspect is the cause of your panic. Think about ways to overcome this, what such a strategy for recovery would involve, and what you could potentially learn from this as a result. Complete this for as many of the tasks in your panic column as you can. If possible, work with an SBM network colleague on this to share experiences and find solutions together, or ask your business mentor to help you with this, if you have one.

<b>Example of panic situation</b>	<b>Cause</b>	<b>Potential solutions</b>	<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Learning</b>

More practical resources and templates are available for members from the Optimus Education Knowledge Centre

<http://my.optimus-education.com>