Solving Time Management Problems

Managing personal workload and other individuals and teams effectively is not possible when the role and responsibilities of the manager are uncertain. The solution is to arrange for these to be discussed, clarified and agreed, and communicated to other managers and to operational employees.

Whilst role and responsibilities can be relatively easily agreed, the question of degree of authority is often more difficult. A manager that has the responsibility for activities but, for example, has no authority to make necessary local activity changes, be flexible in managing budgets, praise or reward good performance, or discipline poor performance, will run into difficulties that can delay progress, consume unnecessary time, confuse operational employees and undermine the status of the manager.

In most organizations the pace of change and the complexity of activities are such that it is essential to forecast, plan, and prioritize. Unless this is done the manager will not be able to defend against potential problems, will waste time on unimportant activities, miss important deadlines. All of these negative effects will then, in turn, exacerbate the problems faced by the manager. The solution is to adopt a system of forecasting, planning, and prioritizing.
Prioritizing can be determined through discussion with senior management and specialists, then communicated to the team. Activities should be linked to outcomes, objectives, deadlines, so that all involved are aware of the purpose of the activity. As part of this process, the manager should involve other individuals and teams as appropriate, and communicate the plans and priorities to all involved. In this way the manager will be in control of activities, prepared for potential difficulties, and have the support of key colleagues.

We look at this separately from the section above because setting unrealistic deadlines is a hidden cause of many time management problems. The manager must ensure that deadlines are achievable, otherwise the failure to meet them will itself become an additional problem that will impact on other outcomes and deadlines. However, it is rare for a plan to prove perfect, and deadlines do come under threat and may have to be changed.

The solution is to make certain that deadlines are set as realistically as possible, and that where circumstances do change appropriate corrective action is taken, to enable the deadline to be met, or to set a new one. This flexibility of response to change must be a part of the plan. In major projects there should be contingency plans in place to allow appropriate responses to be made to known potential threats.

Usually this is not the direct fault of the individual manager, rather it is caused by corporate decisions that leave areas of activity under-resourced. However, it is a problem that individual managers must deal with. In situations where physical or financial resources are inadequate, the manager must take these factors into consideration when forecasting, planning and prioritizing. Being realistic about any resource shortcomings will produce a realistic plan. Where the resource shortage is one of people, manpower, the same planning approach must be taken. However, in cases of forecast shortage of human resources, and particularly when unexpected shortages occur, there is an added danger that the manager will take on additional tasks, roles, responsibilities, and add these to the existing workload. This is to be avoided if at all possible, except for extreme emergencies and very short periods of time.

It is impossible for the manager to manage effectively if they are overburdened with additional workload. Worse, they will often be unsuitable, in knowledge, skills, expertise, or physical attributes, to carry out these activities to a high standard. The result, potentially, can be highly damaging, as the manager loses control in key areas, and loses respect through their inability to perform to an acceptable standard in the inappropriate work they have taken on.

The solution is to find another solution. This could be to: adjust the plan and deadlines to take into account the missing resources; negotiate for additional resources; bring in appropriate resources from lower priority activities. Due to the culture in some organizations it is difficult for managers to take such assertive, positive action, but if a strong, logical case is presented to senior management, most will accept the necessity of providing the required resources or adjusting the plan.

This is a major cause of problems. At the heart of it is the lack of understanding of the role of delegation. Because delegation is not understood, managers fall into many delegation traps: some do not recognize when delegation is necessary; some believe that it is better to do certain tasks themselves, as they see themselves as more expert or more trustworthy; some delegate but to the wrong people; others give insufficient information when delegating; many do not give sufficient support to the person delegated to; many do not monitor the delegated activity; many do not review the performance of those delegated to; hardly any ensure that individuals receive training and development in how to deal with delegated activities and responsibilities.

The solution is to learn about delegation and to adopt best practices in this activity. Effective delegation releases the manager to focus on other issues, generates positive responses from individuals and teams, and develops individuals and teams. It is a highly valuable technique that the manager must learn to do well.

Meetings are necessary, but they must be productive meetings. The manager has two types of meetings that they must manage effectively. The first type is the meeting where the manager is the leader, the chair, the caller of the meeting. With these, the solution to making them productive is to manage them according to the established best practice. Those meetings that the manager attends purely as a participant should also be managed, but in the sense that the manager makes optimum use of the opportunity to obtain and present information, contribute to decision making, and maintain positive relationships.

Information that is insufficient, inaccurate, invalid, out of date, or not relevant will result in decisions that are flawed and this will impact negatively on the control over time management of the manager (and others). The usual cause of poor quality information is the lack of an effective system for gathering and analyzing information. This can relate to external environment information and internal monitoring, control, and review of activity.

The underlying cause of poor time management and resulting problems is the personal behavior of the manager. As well as the manager’s response to the problems described above, there are a number of negative personal behaviors which aggravate the situation, including:
Lacking assertiveness: leading to problems such as being unable to deal with conflict or poor performance. Having a disorganized approach: visible by an untidy desk, rushing to meet personal deadlines, submitting reports late. Fear of loss of control: leading to an inability to delegate, and in extreme cases refusing to take holidays or legitimate sickness absence.

Aiming for perfection: an impossible dream but one that some managers pursue relentlessly. Inability to complete tasks: linked to the previous behavior, this is a weakness that leads to the build up of workload and unnecessary pressure, and often has negative repercussions on others. Being over-ambitious: some managers believe that appearing to be managing a huge workload, or carrying out key tasks personally, will be viewed as attractive qualities and lead to promotion, while the opposite is usually true.

Over-reacting to events: not giving enough reflection, analysis, discussion, to events, and rushing in with an inappropriate and potentially damaging response. Inability to refuse work: resulting in taking on too much work and potentially causing damage in terms of raised personal stress levels, poor quality outcomes, and conflict with others.

Procrastination in dealing with difficult decisions or taking difficult action: resulting in the build up of tasks and problems which combine to cause time management problems but also could cause damage as they reach crisis level. Not managing interruptions from colleagues, visitors, telephone calls, emails: caused by not planning how to deal with unwanted interruptions, overestimating your own importance, being too easily available, having an open-door policy, not having unavailable times, being afraid of offending others, working in an inappropriate location.

The solution is obviously for the manager to change their behavior. However this is not easy. It can only be achieved by building behavioral change into personal development activity, and with support from the line manager, specialist help, and other colleagues. The manager can, of course, take some independent action, once the causes have been identified, but many are not able to recognize that there is a problem. Most managers are not aware of the extent to which their behavior is causing them time management difficulties.

Appraisals and other performance feedback channels should be used, pro-actively, by all managers to examine their time management performance. Where shortcomings are identified then appropriate corrective action should be built into the next phase of the manager’s personal development plan. Improvement in the identified areas then becomes one of the aspects of the manager’s future performance that is monitored and appraised.

Managing time in the workplace successfully is not an easy task. However, despite the difficulties, by implementing the solutions suggested here the manager will be able to effectively manage their role, responsibilities, and workload. With help from others and the application of a consistent, positive, thoughtful approach, the manager will find that they can manage time effectively.