# Communication & Self-Management

## Prioritization & Time Management

### Executive Summary

*Principles*

Self as Instrument

Regardless of your work, you are the one doing it. Just as a lumberjack would take care to keep his axe sharpened, so should you be taking care of yourself, so that you can be effective in your work. While we often see self care activities as in conflict with what we need to do to get our work done, in fact we are much more likely to be more productive if we take care of ourselves.

Pushing the Envelope

Our workplace culture creates a lot of implicit and explicit limitations on what behaviors are seen as appropriate and what behaviors are not. In addition, we have our own workplace habits, many of which are of long standing. To create change, we must be willing to experiment, pushing the envelope both for ourselves and our colleagues. For example, can you turn off your email and stop responding to text messages for two hours in the morning because you are concentrating on a high priority project? What consequences will this have for you in terms of your own habits

*Prioritization*

Strategic Questions

We have way more ideas for activities and initiatives than we will ever have time for. How can you determine which ideas are worth the time, energy, and attention it takes to bring them to fruition? One way to do that is to create critical questions as tests. Think about the critical success factors in your role, the things you need to do to achieve success for yourself, your supervisor, and your department. Then write questions that test whether an idea will help to achieve them. Examples from a Training & Development Manager in an HR Department:

* Does it help to strengthen HR’s reputation with directors and senior leaders?
* Does it create or strengthen partnerships inside and outside of Williams?
* Does it help me reach new audiences?
* Does it make managers better at managing?
* Does it help people have difficult conversations?

Forced Choice

If you’re having difficulty prioritizing activities, one of the easiest way to prioritize them is to write a header for each one on an index card, and then put the index cards in order of priority. Then record their order of priority.

An online tool for prioritizing a large number of items or activities can be found at:

<http://www.beverlyryle.com/prioritizing-grid>

Time Management Matrix

In his seminal book The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Stephen Covey divides tasks along 2 continua: importance and urgency.



Very often we prioritize urgent work over non-urgent work, and procrastinate by doing items that are neither urgent or important. For most people , the work that will have the most lasting value and impact is in the “important but not urgent” category, and yet it often seems hardest to protect time for those tasks. Understanding where your work lies within these quadrants can help you to find and prioritize your “important but not urgent” tasks.

*Managing Attention and Energy*

Attention as a Limited Resource

According to David Rock, author of *Your Brain at Work*, attention is a limited resource. The more you use it in the course of a day, the less you will have of it. We tend to gravitate towards tasks that don’t require a lot of attention and concentration, often with the thought “I’ll get this out of the way and then I will work on the harder project.” This is counterproductive as by the time we reach the time in the day for those harder tasks, we have run out of attention. Instead, be aware of those times in the day when you have the most energy and attention, and protect that time for tasks that require more concentration and focus.

Focusing Strategies

Once you have decided to focus on an activity, the following strategies can help you to be more productive:

1. *Lower the stakes.* We tend to avoid and procrastinate activities where it seems that the risk for failure is high and the consequences will be disastrous. As much as possible, work to create a safety net so that you know you will be ok regardless of what happens.
2. *Give your brain clear instructions.* Our brains evolved to handle highly concrete problems like building a fire. When we give our brain an instruction that is made up of abstract concepts like “finish that report,” it is hard for our brains to help us do them. Instead, get very clear about what the concrete next step is, and focus on that. For instance, the next step might be “turn on my computer, open a web browser, and begin research by searching for *x*.
3. *Time-limited work periods*. Research has shown that shorter, focused work periods followed by a break are more effective. It is more motivating to work on something for 30 minutes, take a break, and then decide what to do next than to punish ourselves by saying that we are going to work for however long it takes to finish something.
4. *Centering exercise*. You can put yourself into an optimal state of consciousness for peak productivity by taking 12 breaths with eyes closed before beginning a focused work period:
   1. 3 breaths to let go of the past
   2. 3 breaths to let go of the future
   3. 3 breaths to come into the present moment
   4. 3 breaths to come into the optimal state of energy and concentration for a task

Energy and Attention Boosters

The following activities have been scientifically proven to have benefits on energy and concentration. Again make small experience to see if you experience these benefits:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Activity | Benefit |
| Exercise | Greater energy, increase sense of agency |
| Nutrition | Increased energy, better mood, lower stress, |
| Meditation | Increased concentration, lower stress |
| Naps | Increases productivity and alertness |
| Walking | Boosts creativity |
| Breaks (brief diversions) | Increases task focus |
| Experience of nature | Reduces fatigue, decreases stress |

One on Ones

One on one meetings with your direct reports have a number of important benefits:

* They allow you to develop a relationship with your employees, so that they are aware that you care about them as people.
* They keep channels of communication open, allowing both of you time to:
  + Give and receive feedback
  + Check on progress towards critical goals
  + Ask coaching questions and identify professional development needs

According to Michael Auzenne and Mark Horstmen of manager-tools.com , an effective format for a one on one is:

* 10 minutes for their agenda
* 10 minutes for your agenda
* 10 minutes for development

A worksheet with more details about the structure of one on ones can be found on the program page associated with this section.