*The ABCs of Sustainable Time Management*

# I. Your individual concerns and the broader context

# II. The ABCs—areas for awareness & action

## Attention—flexible and focused

### Manage attention

###  In the moment: Pause Button

###  In the near term: CDR – Catch, Distribute, Review

###  Over time: Tickler File

## Boundaries—protected and connected

### Task boundaries: 3-Phase Close-Down

### Interpersonal boundaries: The Full Tank

## Choices—in tune with self and others

### Choice Considerations

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### The What-to-Do? dilemma

# III. Session close-down

## The Past—satisfaction practice

## The Future—the next step

## The Present—cultivate the seed of change

*Attention Skills*

These three techniques help you maintain a core of inner attention while responding appropriately to whatever outer demands on your attention arise. Good time managers call upon a wide range of attention states -- single-point absorption, lightly flitting multi-tasking, and everything in between. They give everything its due without getting thrown off.

# In the moment: The Pause Button

At the very moment when you’re interrupted, press your internal Pause button -- jot down a word or fix an image in your mind. After the interruption, come back to that fixed point and pick up exactly where you left off. This works like the Pause button on your movie player.

# In the near term: CDR—Catch, Distribute & Review

This technique washes down attention ‘static.’ Say, while writing a report you remember to pick up the dry cleaning on the way home. Rather than trying to hold that thought in the back of your mind, *catch* it by writing it down (on a sticky, notebook, paper scrap, email, task calendar, etc). *Distribute* the note to where it will make the most sense to review it later. In the example, the note may go in your purse, since the purse goes out with you where you can do something about it. When notes are distributed to where you would use them, you can review them more easily. Regularly *review* your notes to decide what to do and what not to do.

Date your notes; then you have a chronological trigger that may help your recall. If you use a notebook, write on only one side of each page so that if you have to physically distribute them you can do so without having to re-copy what’s on the reverse. Boldly cross out finished items; brightly highlight those still open. That way it’s obvious whether to continue to pay attention to the item or not.

Over time: The Tickler File

Make a set of 17 file folders – one for each month (Jan - Dec), one for each week (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th). Whenever a To-Do comes into your task stream, put a reminder into the appropriate folder, tickling when you need to *start* in order to deliver on time.

On the first of the month, open that month’s folder and distribute the tickles into the week folders. On the first day of the week, open that week’s folder and group the tickles by day. Work through the tickles, day by day. Distribute leftovers to another day. If an undone tickle keeps showing up, decide whether to do it or not.

Recurring tasks can use the same reminder to tickle the next occurrence. Templates work for recurring complex projects, with tickles for each segment.

A tickler can be electronic as well as physical. Enter tickles as above and access them as the weeks and months come up. With electronic ticklers you can park physical papers in a handy file, arranged chronologically by date.

*Boundary Skills*

Good boundaries protect you as they connect you to others. Firm, yet flexible task boundaries contain your work so you can operate effectively within them. Good interpersonal boundaries cultivate your integrity in the midst of competing demands.

Task Boundaries: Three-Step Closedown

Put firm edges around your tasks by containing the time with a timer. Set the timer at least five minutes before the end of the time. Within the boundary you can work freely and intensely. When the alarm rings stop. Take the last few minutes to close down.

In the Closedown, look to

* The Past—Acknowledge progress thus far. If we focus on everything yet to do, we get discouraged. Instead, if you focus on what you’ve done you’ll be continually encouraged.
* The Future—Write down the very next step; schedule the next time to take it up. When you come back, you can pick up right where you left off without taking time to remember where you were.
* The Present—Get back to neutral gear. Gather together any papers you’ve spread out, put the next step trigger on top, and set it aside. You're satisfied with a job well begun, confident that you know exactly where to begin again, and ready for whatever’s next.

Interpersonal Boundaries: The Full Tank

List activities to keep your “resource tanks” replenished. Include some that take little time and no special equipment. Replenish your resources in each area every day.

* Physical resourcing activities
* Emotional resourcing activities
* Mental resourcing activities
* Spiritual resourcing activities
* Good ideas from others

When your boundary is breached and your agenda is co-opted, you can get overwhelmed, confused, and guilt-ridden; or angry, frustrated, and irritated. If you’re overwhelmed, your boundaries are too soft; clarify your agenda and hold to it—step up. If you’re angry, your boundaries are too hard; acknowledge the other person’s valid agenda as well and take a more inclusive view—step back. Find an appropriate middle ground where your boundaries are both firm and flexible.

*Choice Skills*

Making a choice isn’t easy. Whenever we say Yes to one thing, we’re automatically saying No to all the others, and who likes to say No? Consider the following when making a choice.

# Stakeholders and shifting priorities

Who has a stake in your choice? Your boss, those you supervise, the organization as a whole, customers/clients, others, and of course, you. Clarify each stakeholders’ priorities. When priorities shift, communicate that to stakeholders. Be flexible and creative; devise alternatives; call on additional resources; revise/renegotiate timetables and quality levels.

# Quality levels

Loosen perfectionism and ground yourself in reality by operating within a range of quality levels -- Business-As-Usual (perfectly adequate), Quick-And-Dirty (the bare minimum), and Bells-and-Whistles (the snazzy version when resources are abundant). Expecting 100% quality 100% of the time is neither realistic nor appropriate.

The 80/20 rule

In any collection of items – books on a shelf, clothes in a closet, items on a list – 80% of the significance in the collection resides in only 20% of the items. A few are very significant; many are not. Bring the 20% to the foreground; leave the rest in the background.

All good

Recall times when things didn’t go as planned. These situations wake us up and show the need for different choices. So-called bad situations offer the greatest potential for real change. Welcome it all -- the 'good' and the 'bad.'

Untangling the factors

Lay out a sample of six To Do list items, each on a separate card/sticky. Pick one that seems most important; put that on your dominant hand side. Identify the one that’s least important; put that on your non-dominant hand side. Now you have a scale from Least Important to Most Important. Arrange the rest of the items within the scale. Give each item an Importance score (1 - 10, with 10 being the most important); note it in the upper right corner of the card. Now rate the items for each of the following factors, one at a time, noting the score in the remaining corners: Urgent, upper left; Beneficial, lower left; Attractive, lower right.

When a task is high on Importance but low on Attraction, contain the time you spend on it. You can do even the least attractive task for a limited time. If it’s high on Attraction and low on everything else, be sure you do that too. Attraction shows who you are and what you love.

Beware basing choices on the ‘faux’ factors of Quick and Easy. Setting a task boundary equalizes the Quick factor so you can do lengthy tasks in several short sessions. Breaking complex projects down equalizes the Easy factor so that all components are equally do-able.

*A Page Full Of Tips*

\_\_ Notice patterns of time use for a week

\_\_ Pick a pattern; brainstorm what you'd have to give up to change

\_\_ When throwing things out ask, 'does it buoy me up or drag me down?'

\_\_ Do a time/task analysis for a week, a day

\_\_ Use a comprehensive reminder system -- tickler file, lists, appointment book

\_\_ Build realism into To-Do lists

\_\_ Assign top, middle or low priority to each item on your list

\_\_ Schedule restorative activity

\_\_ When sorting papers beware of getting off-task; stay present

\_\_ Note when energy drains off

\_\_ Eliminate advance anxiety; start worrying about something only when you need to

\_\_ Carefully consider the worst that can happen

\_\_ Have some modular task with you at all times

\_\_ Have tasks handy for when you're holding on the phone

\_\_ Take responsibility in meetings

\_\_ Say what you need

\_\_ Consider the need for/use of meetings

\_\_ Make sure everyone at the meeting needs to be there

\_\_ Schedule challenging tasks during peak performance times

\_\_ Radically change a habit, at least for a little while, just to see what happens

\_\_ Postpone 'maintenance reading' to odd moments, not prime time

\_\_ Before placing a phone call, jot down the goal of the call; keep it before you as you talk

\_\_ Arrange workspace so what you use daily is at hand; weekly, within reach; monthly, nearby; less often, out of sight; rarely, archived or gone

\_\_ Organize paper according to tasks (reading, filing, action, consideration, etc.) and/or time (now, soon, later, whenever)

\_\_ Schedule 15 minutes each day for taking stock, sorting, planning

\_\_ Observe how others work

\_\_ Actively look at difficult situations from the other's point of view

\_\_ Look at others' assumptions without judgment

\_\_ Encourage others to tell you what they need

\_\_ When making a decision, ask 'does it contribute to my life and/or work goals?'

\_\_ Allow for people-time, not just task-time

\_\_ Take 100% responsibility for communication (receiving as well as sending)

\_\_ Be a good example by being both human and productive

\_\_ Empower and delegate more

\_\_ If a meeting looks like it will run overtime, renegotiate terms

\_\_ As much as possible, handle papers twice -- once for initial sort, once for action/disposition

\_\_ Identify short- and long-term life goals; contribute to them weekly

\_\_ Identify short- and long-term work goals; contribute to them daily

\_\_ Turn a recurring crisis into a routine

\_\_ Break down complex projects into 20-minute bits

\_\_ Do simple tasks during low-energy times

\_\_ When you bog down, give it 5 minutes of concentration; if that doesn't work, take a break or change tasks

\_\_ Take real breaks

\_\_ Capture creative ideas that come in off-hours and odd moments

\_\_ Learn to say No (firmly, and gently)

\_\_ When you find yourself procrastinating, look for what you gain by putting off the task

\_\_ Build in flexibility; realistic time to respond to others

\_\_ In a complex project do the most time-consuming tasks as soon as possible

\_\_ Change what you can; accept what you cannot

\_\_ Avoid putting your time management problems in others' laps

\_\_ At the interruption moment, fix a word/picture in your mind so you can get back to where you left off easily (the Pause button)

\_\_ Make sure your leisure is revitalizing you

\_\_ Take breathing breaks during the day

\_\_ Pay attention to your health

\_\_ If you can't decide, flip a coin

\_\_ Act on a 'soft' decision' then you can see if the decision was right or not

\_\_ Be sure your safety net is in place when you take a risk

\_\_ When it's not working, instead of trying harder, try something else

\_\_ Date-stamp papers whenever you handle them; 3 strikes and it's Out

\_\_ Alternate between Eagle view (big picture) and Ant view (at work on the ground)

\_\_ End gracefully by allowing a quarter to a third of the total time to close down

\_\_ Invoke the 80/20 Rule: 80% of the significance comes from 20% of the stuff

*Satisfaction practice – good ideas*

Note, in 25 words or less, the good ideas that occurred to you in each segment. These ideas stand out from the rest and show you the path to follow.