Time Management - Quick Tips

Five quick tips for helping academic leaders manage their time more efficiently.

Know Yourself

- It is important to have a clear understanding of the times and ways in which you work best. Ask yourself:
  - ✦ What are my most productive times of day?
    - ○ Are you a morning person or a night owl?

  - ✦ When am I most efficient at different sorts of work?
    - ○ If you have different kinds of work to do, are there some times of day more suited to specific tasks?
    - ○ Do you write more prolifically and creatively in the morning or later in the day?
    - ○ Is there a time that is better for editing and analyzing? Or, one best for routine tasks?

  - ✦ What are the characteristics of environments in which do I do my best work?
    - ○ In isolation and quiet, or with other people around?
    - ○ At a desk, or standing?
    - ○ In the office, or at home?
    - ○ In the public place (e.g., coffee shop), or private area?

  - ✦ How do I prefer to communicate with others? What method is most effective for various goals?
    - ○ Via email? In person? On the phone?
    - ○ How can you vary your approach depending on the subject?

If It Matters, Schedule It

- Once you understand how you function best, use that information to structure your time. Don't count on being able to handle each task as it arises; schedule blocks devoted to your most important goals and try to protect those times. Occasionally last-minute and unexpected items will arise preventing you from adhering to your aspirational schedule; writing it out and sharing it with others can help keep you on track.

- If you find your schedule becoming overwhelming, think about and potentially limit the number of people who can add items to it. Many busy professionals need someone to help them manage all their appointments, and the more control and awareness you have of your own time, the the more likely you are to achieve your goals.

- Your schedule isn't just for the things you HAVE to do, it's also for the things you WANT to do.

  - ✦ Build in time for you to do the writing or reading you prioritize. If you have multiple offices as a new Chair or Dean, consider scheduling some time each week where you will be in the less-well-known one that provides more privacy, where you can focus on your own work. If you don't have access to a second office, consider whether there is a place that is "off the beaten path" where you can spend one morning each week to catch up on your own material.

  - ✦ Examine your schedule to make sure you've accounted for some down time. Even if it's just an hour a week, make sure you have some time for yourself—meditate, go for a swim, go for a drive, walk the dog, anything that allows you to decompress, if only briefly.

Take Time to Reflect

- Often we find ourselves doing things the same way, simply because that's the way we've always done it. The truth is that often we could make adjustments or improvements to our habits, and we don't make them because we haven't taken the time to reflect or take control.

- Think consciously about how you spend your time—chart it! Does your time spent match your priorities? If not, something should change. If you've never taken the time to try this, do it for one week, and examine the results.

- If you find yourself regularly spending a large amount of time on things that don't matter to you at all, reassess. Would adjusting when you do that task minimize the time you have to spend on it? Is it something you could potentially delegate?

- Examine what has worked for you in terms of time management and what has not. Use feedback from others to reinforce your best successes and practices. Don't simply continue practices that are inefficient or frustrating to you, just because that's the way it's always been.

Fix Bad Habits

- If you find yourself regularly working on tasks that are not priorities, recognize it and stop.
  - Do not finish your paragraph, do not tidy up the work, do not write that "one more email."
  - Ask yourself "what do I think my top priority is?"
  - Ask yourself "why am I not working on it?"
    - Too difficult? Don't know what to do next? Too dull? Not aligned with your interests?
- Then make a shift, and work on the top priority.
- Minimize internal compass consequences: be gentle with yourself; give yourself positive feedback for stopping and rerouting; if you are too severe with yourself, you will be less likely next time to even acknowledge you are working on lower-priority items at the expense of your goals.

Plan Ahead

- Particularly in the world of academia, each year has a predictable rhythm. Some elements will be institution-specific; map those out in advance:
  - Recruiting season
  - P&T season
  - Budget season
  - End-of-semester crunches when everyone is stressed and things are hectic
  - Breaks when there are usually lulls in activity and it may be possible to do an intense project—or relax!
- Your institution likely has an official administrative calendar for when things are due: get that early—inquire if it's not provided—and get those dates on your calendar as soon as possible. Then you can block and allocate time to meet those deadlines at a comfortable pace. This is especially useful for third-party deadlines, such as grants and budgets.
- Knowing and planning for the most intense times of the semester will help you understand when you are more or less likely to make progress on other projects, and enable you to meet your commitments more effectively.