



Personal Effectiveness

Here is some advice that might help when you are under pressure or in stressful jobs and situations.

There are three sections:

1. Time Management
2. Whose Problem Is It?
3. Managing Difficult Relationships (Transactional Analysis)

1. Time Management

This is an important skill. We have a duty to the taxpayer to work efficiently. And we all need to balance the demands of work, family and friends, as well as find time for ourselves – to get enough sleep, to relax and to pursue our own interests.

So why are we so often poor time managers? Perhaps we recognise that a good time manager can appear lazy, for (s)he only does what (s)he really has to. We are all reluctant to appear lazy, even if this is a natural accompaniment to great efficiency. Nevertheless, it is worth following these rules:

Concentrate On Your Objectives and Don't Let Others Control Your Time. Do not be too reactive. It is important that *you* decide how to spend your time, and that you do not organise your time so as to please other people. First, cut out any activity that does not take you nearer to one of your objectives. For instance:

- Consider whether that meeting, lunch or conference is going to help you achieve your objectives. If not, don't go.
- Read what you need to know, not what it's nice to know. Is it really likely that those papers will contain important new information? Will reading them take you nearer to one of your objectives? If not, don't read them.
- Do you get your hard information, such as statistics, direct from source? If so, why read endless commentaries on them? Take yourself off all those circulation lists.
- Consider whether it is really essential that the Minister should speak at, or attend, a particular event. Don't forget that you will in due course have to find the time to prepare briefing and write a speech.
- Consider whether you really do need to accompany the Minister.

Don't hesitate, when under pressure, to take control of your time by closing your door, borrowing an empty office, or working at home, in order to avoid interruption. Colleagues should be assured that they can disturb you if it is really necessary, but otherwise you should tell callers that you are 'a bit tied up at the moment'.

If you want a brief word with a colleague, go to see them so that you can bring the conversation to an end when you are ready, rather than wait for them to leave you. And if you want the discussion to be a short one, don't sit down!

Don't worry about refusing to go to a meeting that clashes with an important prior engagement. If the organiser had thought it vital that you were there, they would have first checked your availability. There is more of a problem if you want to be at the meeting, but the organiser does not much care whether or not you are there. You then have to decide which is the most important. But unless the second engagement is clearly more important, it is common courtesy to stick with your prior engagement.

If you do organise or attend a meeting, make sure there is a clear agenda, and decide in advance how much time the subject is worth. If the subject is of some interest to you, but not worth more than a few minutes of your time, ask the person chairing the meeting if you can attend for the key part of the discussion, or tell him or her that you have to leave in so many minutes. Or get someone else to attend on your behalf.

Indeed, the solution to many time management problems is to . . .

Empower your Colleagues. Empowerment requires a certain amount of courage and patience. Work should generally be done by the most junior colleague that can be expected to do it properly, and find it stimulating. The only exceptions are non-repetitive tasks that you can do quickly and easily yourself. It then often takes less time to do it yourself than to tell someone else what needs to be done.

Few of us empower effectively. A significant proportion of what we do could generally be done by colleagues, if we were prepared to invest a little time in training and guidance. This investment of time can seem a burden if you are already under pressure, but the pay back can be amazingly quick. You will not only free up your own time; you will also improve the quality of your colleagues' jobs.

So now you are thoroughly lazy, but still have too much to do. You must now improve the way you organise your work.

The essential first step is to . . .

Prioritise Your Activities. It is in the nature of our work that 80 per cent of our results will come from 20 per cent of activities. It is therefore very helpful to prioritise your work fairly frequently. You should then concentrate on those tasks that are going to be the most effective in getting you closer to your objectives. Leave the lower priority tasks to later in the day, or tomorrow. By definition, it does not matter if you do not finish them today. You can then go home at a reasonable time, secure in the knowledge that you have done your most effective work.

In prioritising your work, it is useful to decide whether it is (a) urgent and (b) important. If it is both urgent and important, you should do it as soon as possible. If it is urgent but not important, delegate it to someone else. If it is important and not urgent, do it later. If it is neither urgent nor important, don't do it!

Paper Handling. A very good rule is to handle each piece of paper only once. For instance, if you read a letter, and know what you want to say in reply, dictate the reply straightaway. Otherwise you will just have to re-read the letter, and rethink the reply, on another occasion. Alternatively, delegate the paper to someone else, or throw it in the bin. The only paper that should be put on one side is that which is (a) important, (b) requires considerable thought, and (c) is not urgent.

Finally . . .

We All Procrastinate. Procrastination is almost always born out of some sort of anxiety. We therefore all need to adopt our own personal solution to this problem. Once you realise that you are putting off a difficult task, you need to plan your campaign accordingly. Set aside a time and place to tackle it. Decide that you will not have lunch, or not go to bed, until you have done so. Spread the papers out. We each can develop our own individual technique. The important thing is to begin the process. You know very well that the task will appear much easier - and less scary - once you have started.

2. Whose Problem Is It?

This should be the first question you ask when you are be faced with a task, problem or issue which seems particularly complex, hard to handle or embarrassing.

It is surprising how often a few moments analysis can lead you to break the problem down into manageable pieces, each to be dealt with by separate people. Indeed, you will often find that the underlying problem does not belong to you, or your Minister, in the first place, whereupon you can relax! A few examples might help:

- If you are concerned about the performance of one of your staff then the problem, in the final analysis, is theirs rather than yours. It is for you, not them, to set standards – that is why you have been asked to manage their work. It may be that your colleague can convince you that you have not given them full credit for certain aspects of their work. Or they might tell you about a temporary problem (e.g. health or domestic difficulties) that is affecting their performance. Failing that, they must either change or improve if they are to avoid the consequences of your concern. Of course the colleague might transfer the problem back to you e.g. by explaining that they are not clear about their objectives, or persuading you they do not have the right resources. But now you have something to fasten on to and the step-by-step identification of the owner of the problem can lead to its resolution.
- If an individual, a charity or a business applies for some sort of permission, or financial support, and provides insufficient information, or information which suggests that it should be refused, then again the problem is theirs, not yours. You must be prepared to say 'No' and not wimp out by asking further questions. Of course you should also explain the nature of the difficulty so that the company or person can decide whether to commit resource to overcoming your objection. But you must make it clear that the decision to do so is theirs, not yours. For goodness sake do not appear to encourage them to do lots of work flexing an application that is almost bound to fail.
- Much the same applies to the person who presses for a quick decision, before you have been able to carry out the necessary consultations or checks. If it is truly impossible to consider the case properly in the time available, you should simply explain that the current decision would be unfavourable. It is for them to decide whether to require you to meet their deadline, or to extend it. (And it is surprising how often they do the latter.)
- And if you are waiting for a task to be completed, or for money or information, the problem is the provider's, not yours. You should get the provider to give you a definite date by which it will appear, beyond which they know that you will hold them responsible for any consequences. The date is then their problem and they can hardly complain if you take unwelcome action after they have failed to meet a deadline that they themselves have set. And it is much better to accept one distant deadline than be forced into giving frequent extensions.

3. Managing Difficult Relationships (Transactional Analysis)

Here are a few techniques that can be used if you feel that you are not getting on with, or not getting through to, someone who is important to you – a concerned member of the public, perhaps, or your boss, or a Minister.

First, pay attention to the need for clear communication. Use simple unambiguous language, and clearly explain the reasons for your proposals or requirements. Never get angry and always be polite (but not unctuous). Remember that aggressive and demanding people often have fairly thick skins. And obsessive people often feel that something is being hidden from them. Tell both sorts of person that you intend, if they agree, not to beat about the bush. They will always agree, and then you can deal with any problem in blunt terms.

Next, pay attention to your relative status. We all communicate with each other as superiors, as equals or as inferiors and we frequently adopt different approaches to the same person at different times. Problems invariably arise, in work as well as at home, when one party's approach does not meet the expectations of the other. (Psychologists call this *transactional analysis*.)

The usual starting point in any analysis of expectations is that we all expect to be treated with respect, and with due recognition of our different skills, experiences and perspectives. For instance, we should not talk down to Ministers (although some colleagues seem to forget this) or to the public (ditto) and Ministers should not talk down to us. Sometimes, however, this approach needs to be abandoned. For instance, you may need to defer to a Minister or manager, e.g. if time is short, or if he or she clearly has much more experience or knowledge than you, or if he or she has already heard enough and wants you to accept their decision. The need for you to do so is usually signaled pretty clearly. If you are slow to notice the signals then problems will certainly follow. Equally, excessive use of deference can also cause problems. Ministers, managers and the public expect to deal, most of the time, with experienced professional civil servants. Lengthy displays of deference will cause them to write you off as inferior in ability as well as status.

So if your relationship with someone seems to be fraught or distant, or if you suspect that they actively dislike you, consider carefully whether you are signaling superiority, equality or inferiority when they are expecting something else. (Psychologists call this *transactional analysis*.) It is then usually best if you change your approach to meet the expectations of the other, but it might be necessary to signal strongly to the other person that you expect them to adopt a different approach when dealing with you.

Finally, we need to work with people as they really are, not as we would wish them to be. We are each, to different extents, extrovert, introvert, practical, creative,

analytical, driven by beliefs, flexible and structured. Some people will be quite different from you, and you will think them decidedly odd. You must put all this on one side when assessing whether the person concerned is talking sense and acting effectively. But you should learn to go further and to some extent adapt your own behaviour to the character of the person with whom you are dealing. If you proudly treat everyone in the same way, you are certainly not dealing effectively with many of them.

Further Reading

You might also like to know [How to Speak Truth to Power](#).

Martin Stanley

[Richborne Publishing](#)

[How to be a Civil Servant](#)