

WORK PRIORITIES

By Chris Perrow, Perrow Systems

Practical Ideas for Effective Task Management

The Art of Prioritization:

1. Establish your priority-setting definitions, for example:
 - High priority: this has a direct value to your work: writing a report, closing a sale, giving a presentation, meeting a deadline.
 - Medium priority: this has an indirect value to your work: setting goals, writing lists, learning new skills.
 - Low priority: this covers tasks which must be done but have no value for you: basic reference filing, deleting junk e-mail.
2. Write a Daily To Do List. Writing anchors the learning from thinking to visual to action.
3. Differentiate your priorities visually. Examples would be:
 - Rank as A, B or C.
 - Color code Red, yellow, green
 - Rank as 1, 2 or 3.
4. If list writing is not your style, use a bulletin board or clipboard and post you To Do's on sticky notes.
5. Practice doing High priorities before Mediums. Medium Priorities before Low.
6. Avoid the two P's of unsuccessful priority setting:
 - **Procrastination:** job is too big, too boring, too annoying, too overwhelming: Break the task down into smaller parts and take action. Chiseling away on an overwhelming task can quickly bring it down to a manageable size.
 - **Perfectionism:** fear of making a mistake can become paralyzing: Break the task into "What's the worst possible outcome if this is not done perfectly?" Can you live with that? Write it down, say it out loud, speak with a work peer to turn a possible fear into a real job.

Controlling Work Interruptions

1. Jot down as many interruptions as you can imagine(including those YOU initiate)
2. For each, ask yourself if it is necessary. Circle it if it is.
3. Look at the other interruptions. What could you do to gain some control over the interruption?
4. Many perceived interruptions actually enhance workflow. Learn to make the time and energy distinction. Phone calls and 'drop-ins' can be very unnerving when you need to be focused on a project. But, phone calls and employee ideas may also be the lifeline of your business growth. Carve out distinct and separate pockets of times for both.
5. Controlling 'drop-in' interruptions:

- Angle your desk so you are not looking directly at your door. This cuts down on eye contact with those passing by.
 - Stand when someone enters your office area; move toward the door as you speak.
 - If you are 'dropping-in', do so on your way out to lunch or to a meeting. Remain standing.
 - Ask 'drop-ins' to return at a given time if you are in the midst of a project.
 - If you are on the phone and a 'drop-in' comes in and stays hands a message pad and pen to the person smile and turn away.
6. Every interruption requires a 6-minute re-focus time for the brain. Try a high energy, focus break for 20 minutes each day. Close the door; turn off the phone and concentrate.
 7. If at all possible, remove yourself from your workstation. Devoting 60 minutes to a High priority task, at a peak personal energy time will pay you back four times over.
 8. Allowing interruptions to control your workday is stressful and non-productive. Taking charge of those you can influence is positive and energizing.
 9. If you are interrupted, take a moment to jot down your thought on the task. It helps your brain to refocus when you return to that task

Finish Tasks to Ease Brain and Paper Clutter:

1. Remember: a task is not done until the paper work is completed.
2. It is imperative to have a system to handle your daily paperwork.
3. Your brain can not focus when there are too many open files and paper piles: on your desk, on your computer or in your brain.
4. Capture your thoughts by jotting down notes:
 - Phone calls: record appointment time and date, what to bring before moving to next item.
 - When interrupted, jot down your thought at that moment. You can re-find your focus much quicker.
 - Papers to be filed: write down where you will file it on the paper (or on a sticky note). This makes the actual task of filing simpler and anchors the retrieval process.
 - Reference materials: jot down why something caught your eye as important at the time. This will help in filing and in actually using the information.
 - Business cards: write down impressions or connections on the back of cards.
5. We anchor learning in three basic steps. Very loosely it has been said: we hear and we forget; we see and we remember; we do and we understand.
6. Spend the last 15 minutes of your day preparing for tomorrow:
 - Check your schedule: DO you need anything for appointments?
 - Handle remaining e-mails.
 - Start your To Do list.
- 7 This end of the day shut down helps ensure a fresh start for tomorrow.

Set Parameters to Avoid Overload:

1. Fact: there is more information disseminated in one day than can be absorbed in a lifetime.
2. Inability to control the overload will lead to burnout.
3. Schedule time to deal with incoming information: mail, e-mail, voice mail and faxes.
4. Do not keep duplicates of minutes, reports, etc. Write destroy dates on items. Keep your files thin.
5. Purge the incoming flow: cancel subscriptions, memo distributions, etc. whenever possible.
6. Set up a duplication policy when possible. An average of 19 copies is made for each piece of paper in this country.
7. Be brief in your comments. Encourage others to so do.
8. It is so important to be realistic about that which is out of your control. Target your energy on all that you can control and take baby steps to improve your productivity. Taking charge of the overload that you can control is positive and energizing.

About Chris Perrow:

Chris Perrow designs organizational systems that fit the nature of the individual, department or company, helping people perform at their peak while maintaining order and flow. As President of Perrow Systems in Silver Lake, Ohio, Chris conducts training for time management, lean office, productivity, change management, leadership, and employee development. Perrow is a member of the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO).

Chris holds a BA in psychology from Muhlenberg College. She has helped clients like Kent State University, Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority, Office Max and SummaCare. to achieve new productivity through new, lasting process training Contact Chris at Perrow Systems at 330-686-0282 or by e-mail at info@perrowsystems.com, or view her website at <http://www.perrowsystems.com>.