

Creative Time Management for Leaders

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“There is never enough time unless you are serving it.” –Malcom Forbes

Time is a leader’s greatest ally or adversary. In the foodservice industry, the very names we ascribe (“Quick Service”/“Fast Casual”/To-Go) speak volumes about the critical role time plays in this fast-paced industry’s success or failure. But unlike other resources we have at our disposal, time can’t be bought or sold, borrowed or stolen, stockpiled or saved, manufactured, reproduced, or modified. All we can do is *make use of it*. And whether or how or *if* we use it well, time nevertheless slips away. We all get an identical allotment: 24 hours in a day, 1,440 minutes between midnights, no less, no more. So how do high-performers seemingly manage the same 24 hours better to achieve greater results? Can time even truly be “managed”?



To most, time is money. But time also flies, goes by, marches on, runs out, is shared, gets killed, is fleeting, waits for no one, is of the essence, has come today, is in a bottle, changes everything, is on my side, and you can’t turn back the hands of it. How we invest, spend or waste our time—and timing—is the primary critical task of the high-performing leader. After all, if you don’t invest time working on the necessary things you’ll constantly be killing it by working on the unnecessary things. Unit managers and multi-unit managers who make the most of their time also make the most of their operations. Let’s look at some proven strategies and tactics for getting more done in a 24/7 world.

Start here. The fact is, you can’t “manage” *time*, you can only manage *activities or tasks*. So for the next seven days, keep a detailed log of what activities came your way and which ones you decided to spend your time on. Were you focusing on the right things; activities that move your business forward, or were you constantly reacting, putting out fires that preventive coaching would have eliminated? Being focused, having an organized workspace, aligning quarterly plans to period execution, and ‘just-saying-no’ to distractions that pull you off task are critical skills that are chronically under-taught and sorely over-needed by foodservice supervisors. Everyday ask yourself three questions: 1) “What is truly important right now considering what my time is worth, 2) “What is *not getting done* while I’m busy doing this other thing?” and 3) “What will happen (or not happen) if I fail to get this done?” Now see the next point.



Planning precedes performance. The managers who complain loudest about time scarcity usually are the least productive and also have the most disorganized calendars. Most performance problems are rooted in poor planning and unfocused prioritizing. If your managers are under-performing look first and foremost at how they're allotting and spending their time.

Allow only necessary and productive tasks into your days. You—not “circumstances”—choose daily between allowing either *necessary* tasks (like reports, running the shift, feedback to supervisors, staff training), or *unnecessary* tasks (like web surfing, computer games, fantasy football standings, checking personal e-mail) into your schedule. “Allow only the important, necessary things into your schedule,” says John Keener, owner of the Charleston Crab House in Charleston, S.C. “Eliminate unnecessary tasks from your work day and you create ‘extra’ chunks of time to get the most important things done.”

Delegate or die. Attempting to micromanage your team and saying “yes” to everything are two common time traps of the inexperienced manager. Great managers get more things done in less time by involving others. Know the difference between tasks that can be delegated (routine tasks that could help others grow) and tasks that should never be delegated (confidential reports, etc). The best delegators are actually “problem-givers.” When someone on your team brings you a problem, instead of saying “I’ll handle it,” ask yourself first if you’re better off challenging them to solve the problem themselves with your input and advice. At every interruption, ask yourself: “Given all that I have to accomplish today, tomorrow and the rest of this week, is this the absolute best use of my time right now?”



Prioritize to a calendar never to a “list.” Assess and prioritize the activities you need to get done and then assign them to a specific calendar day. Forget the old belief that you should assign A, B, and C priorities to each task (for instance, “A” priorities are the activities that are critical, “B” priorities are important but not as critical, “C” priorities would be nice to do if you get the time.) How much time do you spend re-writing and re-assigning these ABC lists to the “next” day? Break each task down into the sequential subtasks necessary to complete the project and then assign those subtasks to a specific day.

Clear the clutter. Start and end each workday with a clear desk. How many precious minutes do you waste daily looking for something underneath the paper? It’s hard to manage the day when you can’t find your desk.

Beware the technology trap. Technology is intended to be an enabler, not an enslaver, but you may have noticed recently that cell phones, texting, e-mail, Blackberries, Twitter and Facebook don’t always save us time. Resist the

constant “ping” when you’re working on important things; check it on the half-hour, not every minute.

Build “*what the hell?*” time into your daily calendar. This is not an industry of absolutes and no matter how well you plan your days, the unanticipated both can and will likely occur. Always “bank” and allot discretionary pockets of time into your daily and weekly schedule to deal with the unexpected fires and demands that can and will pop up. Plan for them, resolve them and then get back to the necessary and productive things.

Leave yourself reminder voicemails. When you’re on the floor managing a shift or driving and get a great idea, send yourself a voicemail, email or tweet while the idea is still fresh and top of mind. This saves you the time—and frustration--of trying to remember the brilliant idea later after a billion other distractions occur.

Remember that in the long run, what you invest your time on is who you are. The only thing that will successfully give you more “time” is changing what you spend your time on. Minimize unexpected problems by investing in team training every shift. Think of it as preventive coaching. Show me a manager or operator who spends his day constantly putting out fires instead of constantly coaching his crew and I’ll show you a unit with low sales and high turnover. “If you don’t have the time to do it right,” Pappy Sullivan used to say, “when will you have time to do it over?”

Jim Sullivan’s newest book is called *Multi Unit Leadership: The 7 Stages of Building High-Performing Partnerships & Teams*. Get his free monthly e-newsletter and product catalog at www.sullivision.com. To hear podcasts of Jim’s columns go to www.sullivision.com/multiu

