

Stewardship of Self for Cross-Cultural Workers: Time Management in an Event-Oriented Culture

The phrase “time management” would not even naturally occur in the language of an event-oriented culture. It is a phrase that would only occur to someone coming into such a culture from a time-oriented one. In time-oriented cultures we think of time as a commodity. Our language reflects this when we talk about “spending” or “saving” time and when we talk about “investing” or “wasting” time. The phrase “time is money” would make little sense in an event-oriented culture.

However, since many cross-cultural workers are from time-oriented cultures and receive support from people with that orientation, it remains relevant to their lives when interacting with family and supporters back in their passport countries.

Jesus lived in a culture in which people did not wear watches on their wrists and did not hang clocks on every wall. Sometimes he responded immediately and went to people, and at other times he delayed his response or withdrew to be alone.

For example, on one occasion when two of John’s disciples began following Jesus, he did not send them away but spent the day with them (John 1:39). Likewise, when Nicodemus came to him at night, Jesus did not say that it was time to go to bed but spent time carefully answering his question (John 3:1-21).

However, on another occasion when his brothers urged him to publicly show himself to the world, Jesus said the time was not right. He said, “You go to the Feast. I’m

not yet going up to this Feast, for the right time has not yet come.” Then when his brothers left for the feast, Jesus also went in secret. (John 7:1-10).

Between these events, Jesus urged his disciples into action because the harvest time had arrived (John 4:35). Likewise we find in Matthew 4:17 that the time had come for Jesus to preach and in Matthew 16:21 that the time had come for Jesus to explain to his disciples what was going to happen. In these cases time referred to an order of events or an opportunity rather than to a schedule, so Jesus dealt with time in a variety of ways. How do we manage our time in an event-oriented culture? Let us consider some ways.

Be God-oriented first.

When asked what was the most important commandment and how to obtain eternal life, Jesus replied with what we call the Great Commandment—putting God first in every area of life (Matthew 22, Mark 12, Luke 10). **Your time with God is the most important thing in either a time-oriented or and event-oriented culture.** Settle this before attempting to answer questions about time vs. event or task vs. people.

The most important question is, “What does God want me to do in this situation?”

- Ask him.
- Pray for wisdom, guidance and help in knowing what to do with your time.
- Look for Scripture passages related to event-oriented cultural responses.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to illumine passages.
- Ask people to pray for you to have God’s wisdom in how to spend your time.

Choose today.

The apostle Paul wrote that for the sake of the gospel, so that some might be saved, he became all things to all people (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). So even if you feel “out of step” and never fully get used to late meetings and the slowness with which events move, join the culture in which you are serving. Remember that people in that culture get things done in their own time, and they often get them done very effectively. For their benefit, choose to try to avoid offending them. It may even be good to develop the “bad” habit of being tardy while working in an event-oriented culture. Your being late may be less offensive to members of an event-oriented culture than your always being “on time.”

Teach and be taught.

First you probably need to learn about the event-oriented culture in which you are living, so be open to being taught.

- Observe.
 - How do people greet one another?
 - How do they connect socially?
 - What do they talk about?
 - How do they say good bye?
- Ask.
 - Consult with other cross-cultural workers.
 - Ask nationals about time-related issues and norms.
 - Ask to which events one can be late and how to interpret the time stated. For example does 8:00 mean 8:00, 8:15, 8:30, or 9:00?
 - Find out what reasons for tardiness are acceptable.

- Ask how late you can or should be. That may depend on your status.
- Read. As you read books about the culture, pay close attention to the sections about the use of time.

Time may be very specific to particular events. For example it may be more acceptable to miss the wedding, than to miss the reception—and perhaps you must not leave the reception before the meal is served and the cake is cut. If your visit to the wake at a funeral is too short, it may be perceived as cursory, indicating that you do not really share in the grief of the family.

After you have learned about time in the culture and been accepted by the people there, it may be good to teach the nationals about your culture. That may help them understand you and interact well with other people from time-oriented cultures. One cross-cultural worker said that those working with him came to admire his traits and activities even though they could not manage those themselves. In fact, they came to depend on his efficiency to get things done in situations when promptness was important.

Coach yourself well.

Quiet those automatic thoughts that condemn event-oriented people as inefficient, unproductive, and wasteful. Replace them with positive thoughts.

- I’m being productive in a different way.
- I’m expanding my repertoire of uses of time.
- I’m becoming more flexible for the Master’s use.
- I’m learning how to manage relationships instead of time.

- I'm learning how not to offend people.
Remember that use of time is not inherently a moral issue. You may just be learning to be more like Mary and less like Martha. What Martha was doing was not bad, but what Mary was doing was better at that time. You may have to earn the right to speak to people's needs before presenting your extensively researched Bible study. Be sure you know what their needs are before you try to speak about them. Remember that the watch on the national's arm may just be a status symbol, not an indicator of time-orientation.

Try these tricks of the trade.

Here are a few things you can do to help you adapt to the event-orientation of an event-oriented culture.

- Take your watch off.
- Remove all clocks from your home.
- Pay attention to the position of the sun instead of the minute hand on your watch.
- Build ample time cushions (between events) into your planning.
- Memorize Scripture when you wind up waiting for half an hour.
- Always carry a Bible or Testament so that you can use unexpected time for devotions, sermon preparation, class preparation, etc.
- Reward yourself for not being time-conscious.
- Make notes of good things that happen when you are not in a rush.
- Journal about times when you are not able to be time conscious.
- Use the time spent waiting to verify that your teaching is understood.

- Use time you spend waiting as a teaching/training opportunity to disciple someone.
- Use the time spent waiting to build rapport with nationals.
- Use the time to observe and learn about your host culture.

Get out of town.

You may want to "escape to a mountain" as Jesus did. At times he got away from people, and he encouraged his disciples to do the same thing. If you are from a time-oriented culture, you may feel more relaxed if you can get away to a place where "time management" is a meaningful concept. Just as you continue to speak your mother tongue at home even when living in another country, there is nothing wrong with having a place where you can make lists and accomplish "things" in timely fashion. Just as it is relaxing in a time-oriented culture to take some time away from that orientation, it may be relaxing to take some time away from an event-oriented culture, time to study and "get things done." Rather than a retreat from time-orientation, it is a retreat to time-orientation.

Some people may believe that a Christian worker, especially a cross-cultural worker, should not refuse to spend time with people who want them to stay, but that was not the case with the apostle Paul. At the end of his second term he briefly visited Ephesus, leaving two other cross-cultural workers to continue the work. When the people of Ephesus asked him to spend more time with them, he declined, saying that he would come back if it was God's will (Acts 18: 20-21). Of course, he did return to Ephesus during his third term and spent several years there (Acts 19:8-10). Not only did Paul leave when asked

to stay longer, but also at times he purposely avoided seeing people when he was in a hurry. At the end of his third term and in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, Paul decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time there. Instead he stopped south of Ephesus and asked the elders of the church to come down to meet him briefly (Acts 20:16-38).

Parable of the exchange rate.

When you enter another country, you exchange your currency for the currency of that country. The exchange rate may vary if you exchange at a bank or in a store. It may vary from town to town. However, you soon learn what the rate is where you are so that you can soon figure how much money you will get for each unit of currency at home.

In the same way, when you enter another country, there is an exchange rate for time. What took one hour in your passport country may take two hours in a large city in the new one. What took one hour back "home" may take four hours in a small town. You can soon make the adjustment in determining the cost in "time" just as you can make the adjustment in terms of currency.

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