

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

Since the time of Jesus, those who work for him have found themselves very busy and have needed to manage their time. As revealed in the book of Mark, Jesus himself seemed to be in control of his time. In the dark of early morning after a busy evening Jesus rose early, left the house and went off by himself to pray. When his disciples found him and told him that everyone was looking for him, he said, "Let's go somewhere else..." (Mark 1:35-38). He said no to some people to make time for others.

Later the crowds surrounded Jesus and his disciples and kept them so busy that they were not even able to eat. When Jesus' family heard about the tremendous time pressure on him, they came to take charge, but they could not reach him either, so they sent someone in to call him out. That time he stayed where he was teaching even when they told him that his family was there for him (Mark 3:29-33). He did not stop teaching just because his family came.

Still later after his disciples had been called, instructed, commissioned, sent out on an evangelistic crusade, and returned, there were so many people around that they again did not have time to eat. Again Jesus asked them to come to a quiet place with him and get some rest. They went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place (Mark 6:7-32). All these examples demonstrate that Jesus took control of his time.

To this day cross-cultural workers, pastors, and other Christian workers find

themselves besieged by people with problems. If these Christian workers are not able to take control of their time, they will soon find themselves burning out, thus being of little use for the work of the kingdom of God.

Following is a collection of time management tips grouped into several categories.

Get Started (procrastination)

People have different reasons for their procrastination, so different strategies may be needed to counteract these different causes. For example, a person who procrastinates because of feeling overwhelmed would need a different strategy from one who does so because of getting a "rush" from hurrying around just to get the job done on time. A person who procrastinates because of perfectionistic tendencies would need a different strategy from one who does so to avoid responsibility. The following strategies may help you get started.

- Break a seemingly impossible large task into smaller sections. Then plan and schedule times to tackle these more manageable sections.
- Start with the most difficult part first if you are the kind of the person who likes to get the worst out of the way first.
- Start with the easiest part first if you are the kind of person who needs the reward of completing some part to encourage you to go on to the next step.
- Reward yourself each time you complete a part of the task, no matter how small.
- Go on to another part of the task when you get stuck on one part. Come back to complete the one you were stuck on after you have had some time to think it over.

- Take advantage of unexpected opportunities. When an appointment is cancelled, do something else that needs to be done.
- Do nothing. Just sit with the project for fifteen minutes and look at it. That may motivate you to get going or allow a plan to begin to develop in your mind.
- Change nothing. You have survived so far with your procrastination, and starting at the last minute may just be your style if you consistently finish on time in the end.
- Decide beforehand how well the task needs to be done. For some people cleaning the cabin means sweeping the floor. For others it means sweeping and mopping the floor. For still others it means removing the cobwebs from the crawl space beneath the floor as well.
- Work with a partner, a non-procrastinating one. Give that partner permission to prod you on without your resenting it. Let their strength compensate for your weakness.

Get There (out of the house on time)

Some people get started on the task but have difficulty getting where they are going. The following strategies may help you get out of the house on time.

- Prepare ahead of time. At the latest be ready the night before.
- Make a list of the things you need to do, including a realistic time estimate for each task that needs to be done. Then add up all the times to make sure you leave enough to complete the task.
- Set an alarm for 10-15 minutes before you have to leave to give you warning to do last minute things.

- Have a particular place you keep things (like keys, books, folders) that you will need to take with you when you leave so that you do not have to spend time looking for them when you are ready to walk out of the house.

Keep Going (interruptions)

Once you have started, you may find it difficult to keep going because of interruptions. The following tips often work in a time-oriented culture.

- Publish and/or post your open-door office hours; then keep them faithfully. People will learn to respect them if they can reliably find you there for open-door time.
- Use "DO NOT DISTURB" signs, and even lock your door. People expect you to be involved in counseling and other situations where you should not be interrupted.
- Group interruptions. If someone is coming to fix your telephone, try to schedule the copier repair and the plumber at the same time.
- Go to a different place where you are unavailable because no one knows where to find you. Jesus frequently went off by himself or with his disciples.
- Use e-mail to conduct routine "business," and turn off the announcement on your computer that says, "You have mail."
- Have a professional evaluate you for ADD/ADHD if interruptions distract you more than they seem to distract others.
- Have an agenda for every meeting, and direct interruptions to the "new business" section of the meeting.
- Although it may seem artificial at first, conduct your meetings using *Robert's*

Rules of Order so that you can deflect interruptions without people taking it personally.

Keep Going (telephone calls)

Although the telephone can be a time saver, it can also be an interrupter as well. These tips can minimize those interruptions.

- Have someone else answer the phone for you.
- Use the phone to call ahead to make sure others are expecting you for appointments.
- Use answering machines.
 - Leave messages for others on their answering machines.
 - Use your answering machine to screen your calls before answering.
 - Get an answering machine that allows people to leave long messages if they want to get a message across to you without calling back. (This may be problem for youth pastors whose middle schoolers delight in playing tapes to them over the phone—and they have to listen to the whole tape to make sure there are not other important messages.)
- Establish a “telephone time,” like you have “office hours,” when you will be available to talk on the phone.
- When you answer the phone say, “I only have ___ minutes to talk.”
- When the conversation has gone about as far as it needs to, say, “Before I hang up...”
- Set a timer to go off so that the person on the other end can hear it and say, “I’ve got to go.”

- Purchase a phone with portable headphones so that you have both hands free to do other things while talking on the phone.
- Remove your phone from the jack or turn off the ringer if you do not want to be disturbed.

Use a Timer (or clock)

In a time-oriented society, we must certainly talk about using our time technology.

- Have a clock in every room so that everyone can potentially be aware of the time.
- Set an alarm for the end of the estimated time for completing a task. It will remind you that you are taking longer than expected.
- Set the alarm, and play “beat the clock” to see if you can get the task done before the alarm goes off.
- Set multiple alarms of a watch timer at 15-minute (or other times) intervals so that you will be reminded continually of the passage of time.
- Set the alarm to signal that it is time to move on to the next task.

Leave (when you are done)

When you have completed your task, it is all right to leave. Remember that Jesus himself at times said “goodbye” and left. He got away by himself and spent time alone with the Father.

Miscellaneous tips

- Delegate tasks to others. Jethro urged Moses to delegate some of his

responsibilities to others (Exodus 18). Jesus sent his disciples out to preach and heal (Mark 6, Luke 9). The Twelve delegated responsibility to seven more (Acts 6).

- Always carry something with you to do. You may get caught in traffic; someone may be delayed for an appointment with you, and so forth.
- Ask people to pray for you related to your use of time.
- Have an accountability partner hold you responsible for your use of time.
- Get help from someone who is naturally gifted at planning and organizing.
- Learn how to multitask; do several things at once.
- Save time by organizing things other than time.
 - Develop an organizational system for paper (mail, books, files, etc.).
 - Order your financial records and budget.
 - Organize your physical space so you do not waste time looking for things.

Good stewardship of time involves budgeting time, just as you would money. Just as there is never as much money as you wish you had for your priorities, there will never be enough time to spend on all your priorities. Therefore, you have to decide how much total time you have available and what percent of it you will spend on each priority.

For example, as you would make a list of expenses to budget your money, it may be helpful to make a list of items for your time budget and assign a percent of your available time to each. You may decide what percent of your time each day or week you can routinely devote to prayer, study, exercise, maintaining relationships, household chores, etc.

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