

Time / life management

The other day I completed yet another questionnaire about how I use and abuse my time at work. It told me the usual things – to tidy my desk, for example, and to make a clean start every day. To deal with emails and phone calls at set times, so that I minimise interruptions. The trouble is, like many people, I like interruptions (unless I'm really absorbed in something), and I hate tidying my desk!

In looking at time management, the questionnaire assessed behaviours, and then suggested alternative behaviours, which is fine, if my time management problem were about my behaviour. It isn't.

Similarly, other courses offer to teach you time management skills – like using a filofax, or its electronic equivalent, which equips you with a mobile filing and diary system. I know how to file, and how to keep a diary. I know I'm supposed to make appointments with myself for thinking time or report preparation time. My time management problem is not about skills either.

No, my time management problem is about my attitudes to time and my beliefs about how I should spend it. Bombarding me with hints and tips on behaviours and skills won't work – all these things just bounce off my beliefs without making any impression on me at all.

For example, I believe that my time at work should be spent doing things that are important or necessary. Filing falls into neither of these categories, unless I have to find something for an important purpose, then I might do some sorting out, otherwise my filing will always be left until non-work time, during which I allow myself to do trivial tasks. Needless to say, I have a lot of other demands on my non-work time, so filing happens spasmodically. This means that my work area can look messy at times. Since I believe this is unimportant, I happily maintain it so, since it gives me more time to do important things.

My focus on these important things was sharpened by the "big rocks" story, which I heard a long time ago, and for once, this was a time management theory that did impact my beliefs. For those of you who don't know it, here it is:

AN ILLUSTRATION OF TIME MANAGEMENT

One day an expert in time management was speaking to a group of business students and, to drive home a point, used an illustration those students will never forget. As he stood in front of the group of high-powered overachievers, he said, "Okay, time for a quiz." Then he pulled out a one-gallon wide-mouthed jar and set it on the table in front of him. Then he produced about a dozen fist-sized rocks and carefully placed them, one at a time, into the jar.

When the jar was filled to the top and no more rocks would fit inside, he asked, "Is this jar full?" Everyone in the class said, "Yes". Then he said, "Really?" He reached under the table and pulled out a bucket of gravel. Then he dumped some gravel in and shook the jar, causing pieces of gravel to work themselves down into the space between the big rocks. Then he asked the group once more. "Is the jar full?" By this time the class was on to him. "Probably not," one of them answered.

"Good!" he replied. He reached under the table and brought out a bucket of sand. He started dumping the sand in the jar, and it went into all of the spaces left between the rocks and the gravel. Once more he asked the question, "Is this jar full?" No! The class shouted. Once again he said, "Good." Then he grabbed a pitcher of water and began to pour it in until the jar was filled to the brim. Then he looked at the class and asked, "What is the point of this illustration?" One eager beaver raised his hand and said, "The point is, no matter how full your schedule is, if you try really hard you can always fit some more things in it!" "No," the speaker replied, "That's not the point. The truth this illustration teaches us is: If you don't put the big rocks in first, you'll never get them in at all." What are the 'big rocks' in your life? Your children, your loved ones, your education, your dreams, a worthy cause, teaching or mentoring others, doing things that you love, time for yourself, your health, your significant other.

Remember to put these BIG ROCKS in first or you'll never get them in at all. If you sweat the little stuff (the gravel, the sand) then you'll fill your life with little things you worry about that don't really matter, and you'll never have the real quality time you need to spend on the big, important stuff (the big rocks).

If you have a time management problem, if your big rocks are not all in the jar, look at the behaviour – what you are doing to stop the rocks going in there, then work out what belief it is supporting. If you don't have time for one of your big rocks, is it that you are afraid of starting, for fear of failure? Or could you be holding a belief that you'll put a big rock in the jar later – when you have more time? And when will that be? Are you so confident that there will be a "later"?

Beliefs can be time stealers at all levels. Not delegating is a good example. If you have people who could help you, but choose to do everything yourself, ask what beliefs you are holding. Here are a few possibles:

Only I can do it the way I want it
I can't trust them to do it well enough
They won't want to help me
They aren't good enough to do this

Don't try delegating until you've changed one or more of these beliefs, otherwise whatever work you delegate will bounce back to confirm your beliefs, because of the spirit in which you've delegated.

Another example is selling. You may find it difficult to fit this into your busy schedule. Now why would that be?

Could it be that your attitude to selling is getting in the way?

You may believe that you are no good at it.

You may think that people hate receiving sales calls, so that means they're going to hate you

You may believe that it is a rather unsavoury activity, unnecessary if you were to win business the "proper" way, through referrals.

With any of these beliefs, it is hardly surprising to find selling slipping off your list for the day. No amount of diary management is going to drag it back up there for more than a short time unless you can change some of those beliefs. If changing them is too big a stretch, then take them on temporarily, just while you are selling.

For example, you are a consultant – you help people. You are not selling, you are offering help. Your prospect might not need your help, so never mind, maybe another time, maybe another prospect. This is very different from the foot in the door sales image we all seem to carry in our heads.

So look at your big rocks, and check that you've put them all in the jar. If some are still lying outside, ask why. What beliefs do you hold about them that mean they don't fit? Maybe some of the big rocks in the jar should be pebbles. Lay them all out and decide how you want to spend your life. It's quite important, this stage, so give yourself time! Whatever feels wrong, whatever doesn't fit, go back to your beliefs and work out why. We tend to think of time management as a minor issue, but in the context of our whole life, nothing is more important.