

# EFFECTIVE TIME MANAGEMENT: LOWER YOUR EXPECTATIONS, BUT NOT YOUR STANDARDS

By Debbie Williams

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Time management and perfectionism: this sounds like a contradiction, doesn't it! Although it is true that anything worth doing is worth doing well, you can do something well without doing it perfectly. It's important to understand the difference between doing your best and striving for perfection in a given task, which is a time management skill I teach my students at my seminars and teleclasses. By lowering your expectations but not your standards, you can produce work that you are proud to claim as your own without driving yourself and those around you absolutely nuts!

## A Sense of Style

Not everyone marches to the same beat or has the same personal style as you do. It's a known fact, one that you must accept early in your career in order to avoid major disappointments. Sometimes people need time to digest what you've said to better understand what you really need, or whether or not they want to proceed with the proposal you've put before them. For example, I'm known in some circles as the Email Queen, a title of which I am quite proud. It's the quickest way I know of to broadcast a lot of information in a short period of time, and since I work from home, it's proven most effective. I can go right down my "to do list", writing short messages to colleagues, mentally checking them off as I go. Not only am I able to get my message across using my own personal communication style, but I don't have to worry about interruptions, background noise, or calling during business hours.

I prefer to receive information this way as well – I am a Visual Learner. Tell me something detailed and it quickly goes in one ear and out the next. So is it fair for me to get upset when my colleagues don't return my emails promptly? And what IS prompt, anyway? What's a fair turnaround time for an email? (Two hours, four hours, the next day, a week?) In fact, if I sent an email message to my colleague Karen, an Auditory Learner, she may not return it at all! Karen finds it much easier to call me on the phone to tell me her thoughts on a project. For me, phone conversations are a waste of time. But to Karen, it's quick, effective, and immediate. She has an agenda, tells me how long our conversation will last (her available time for this meeting), and sets a kitchen timer. When it rings, we end our phone conversation and hang up.

Neither style is right or wrong in the arena of time management. What feels right is what you should try to use on a consistent basis. Just don't get upset when things don't always go your way!

## Walk a Mile in My Shoes

Some people habitually run late, others wait to tackle a report until hours before the deadline, and many do not really mean things as literally as they say them. Each of us has our own way of saying and interpreting things, and that has to be taken into consideration in day-to-day communication.

Let's say you're a sales rep, and you have a hot lead that you met at your chamber of commerce mixer last week. The next day, you phoned to reintroduce yourself and told John Doe, how much you enjoyed meeting him. John's away from his desk (how we love those cell phones) and

promises to call you back this afternoon so you can set up a meeting to further discuss your company's new fall line. But wouldn't you know it? He doesn't call.

Two days later, you phone him again, only to be told by Mr. Doe's assistant that he is out of the office, and so you leave a message. By now your time management skills are kicking in so you leave details of why you are calling, when you can best be reached, and so forth. At the end of the week, you still haven't heard from Mr. Doe and you're wondering whether to pursue this once-strong lead, or to just write him off. Is it time to implement a "2 Call Rule : two calls and then stop the pursuit? Or do you routinely follow up on all leads because that's how you were trained? Only you can be a fair judge of how much contact it will take to make your sales efforts pay off.

What you DON'T know is whether John Doe has a sick mother, a new baby, or must confer with his business partner before meeting with you. Maybe he had to leave town rather quickly, but didn't tell you because, frankly it's not your business. You just never know the whole story, so try to be courteous without being aggressive in your dealings with him (or his office). What's the solution? When do you stop being effective in your system and start being unproductive?

### **Follow Up and Forget**

The beauty of having a strong follow-up system in place is that you can routinely post it and forget it. Write it down, file it away, and move on to the next project. Whether you use a notebook planner, PDA, or calendar software, write your list of to do's down and forget about them. Create priorities that work for you, such as A,B,C or Must Do, Need to Do, Wish I Could Do. Then check your list on a daily basis to avoid missing important meetings and deadlines. If the thought of facing a long list each day intimidates you, then limit yourself to 5 things on your list, or use index cards with only one task per card. Or make a short list, and then use a filing system to track the paperwork necessary to carry out those tasks.

Whatever your system, whatever your style, try not to expect too much from yourself or others, because whatever can happen will happen. Life is not perfect, and neither are you or your office mates. The best planned sales presentation will fail if your handouts and notes are locked in your briefcase and the lock breaks. Or your perfectly organized slide presentation becomes jumbled when your assistant accidentally dumps the carousel on the floor. Or you have to give a last-minute sales pitch to a group of investors because your partner (the professional speaker) spent all night at the emergency room with a bad case of food poisoning. Include the human factor when you organize your project, so won't find yourself being disappointed at every turn. Expect the best from those on your team, then accept it. You'll still maintain your high standards, but your expectations will be much different and much more attainable.