

# All in good time...

## Teaching timing

To teach time management skills effectively, argues **Clare Forrest**, you must recognise that habits are hard to break...

**T**here's a popular idea doing the rounds just now, that time management doesn't exist (because you can't manage time) and that we should actually call it self-management. There is, of course, a large degree of truth in this.

However, I would argue that there's truth in the assertion that all management, whether of people, money or any other resource, is actually self-management. Why else would we invest some much energy (there's yet another resource) in areas such as influencing, leadership, communication and so on? To manage all these other resources effectively we have to manage our own approach to them.

In other words, the time/self management debate is something of a red herring. Time is simply another resource. The real issue is whether we each look after it successfully, badly, or indeed, at all. The only real difference with our time resource, as opposed to our other resources such as money, people and so on, is that:

- It is non-negotiable in terms of the amount there is. It is what is. We can't 'make time'; we can only change how we use it
- None of us knows how much of it we have
- If we don't use it well at work then this bad management encroaches on our 'other' time

lives – time for self, time for friends and family

### A change of approach – but from whom?

There's an old saying that, 'you can't change others, you can only change yourself'. For example, if there's a performance problem with a team member that needs to be addressed, I might:

- Examine how I've been meeting their motivational needs
- Consider whether I've built rapport with them
- Look at my communication style – have I been clear and consistent?

Indeed there's a whole host of approaches I could take, all of which would be about me changing my strategy to see if that changes the results I get. And there's the rub – I have to change.

Of course, I always have the choice to change nothing at all – which means that either nothing ever changes or (very likely) things get worse.

### key learning points

- Designing time management training is about changing habits
- One solution does not fit all: look for many and varied solutions to problems
- Adopt 'Process not Prescription' in the design





Have you ever watched 'The Bank of Mum and Dad'<sup>1</sup>? Men and women in their 20s and 30s, whose spending is out of control and who have amassed huge debts as a result, have to over their purse strings to their mum and dad for one week. For that week, it's mum and dad who decide what their indebted offspring can spend their money on.

With their parents living with them full time, emotions run high as the 'children' are forced to face up to their mounting debt problems and make some tough decisions. The most striking thing about the programme is how reluctant the 'kids' are to change their approach to spending, even though they know that they're in serious financial trouble and even though they've agreed to take steps to change things.

Or maybe you've seen the bracingly awful 'How Clean is Your House'<sup>2</sup>, in which presenters Kim and Aggie clean up years of grime from houses whose owners have allowed the filth to get completely out of control?

Both of these shows, and many others like them, describe for us a very clear pattern of human behaviour: we find it hard to break a habit, even when we know it's damaging us. In fact, we'll often do all we can to cling on to our old behaviour, because it's what we know and are comfortable with. Changing our habits, which we have cherished and nurtured over many years, is challenging.

### **The challenge of personal change**

It's this challenge that we have to consider carefully when we're designing time/self (whatever you like to call it) training programmes.

Whatever we suggest, however sensible our tips and techniques, we are likely to be challenging some, most or all of our delegates at a very fundamental level. Even if they've chosen to come to our

event, this will still be the case, but the effect doubles if the delegate has been 'sent', as I found out to my cost a few years ago.

I was giving a seminar on time management to a large group – the seminar style and the size of the group meaning that there were few opportunities for delegate interaction. At some point I mentioned Murphy's Laws<sup>3</sup> – 'Everything that can go wrong, will go wrong' and 'Everything takes longer than you think' – and talked about how we often set ourselves up to fail by not taking these simple premises into account when planning our days.

As an example I talked about traffic. 'How often,' I asked, 'do you come across people who use traffic as an excuse for being late?' General murmur of recognition and some wry smiles from the group. 'But', I followed up, 'what is true about driving today is that you're more likely than not to get stuck in traffic. Increasing traffic is a fact of the road, which means the majority of journeys are going to take longer than they used to.

Which means, if we haven't taken this into account, that we're more likely to be late than on time. This lateness causes us stress and creates an unwanted domino effect on the rest of our day, as we play catch up. Murphy's laws in action. We set ourselves up to fail by not taking the reality of traffic into account'.

As I finished I could see those little light bulbs, which we all look for as trainers, flashing above the delegates' heads as the basic premise dawned. 'Great', I thought, 'Now we can pursue and discuss the whole idea of realistic planning'.

At which point, one delegate (who had arrived late – that's another law of time management training) suddenly stormed at me 'You can't ask me to drive faster – that's dangerous'. Puzzled, I pointed out that I was in fact suggesting, albeit obliquely, that we need to plan for traffic and set off



## The 5-step model

| step                                    | objective  | useful data  | possible exercises and activities  |
|---|--|--|--|
| step one: why change?                   | to motivate delegates to change                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>stress statistics and case studies</li> <li>working time statistics and case studies</li> <li>explanation of relationships between stress, time and personal control</li> </ul>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>stress questionnaires</li> <li>benefits of 'more time' discussion/group work</li> <li>'where am I now?/how do I want my future to look?' collages/drawings</li> </ul>                     |
| step two: what needs to change?         | to identify what each person needs to change                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parkinson's Law</li> <li>statistics on how people use/waste their time at work</li> <li>variety of time logs</li> <li>interview briefs</li> </ul>                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>paired 'interviews' to identify time problems</li> <li>time logs (can be done pre/post event)</li> <li>case studies</li> <li>gap analysis</li> <li>role purpose</li> </ul>                |
| step three: how will things be changed? | to provide tips and techniques and put changes into practice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>all the ideas you can find which may be useful. Don't just stick to your favourite solutions – you're looking for a range of options to suit people's different approaches</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>personal styles inventories (e.g. SDI, Belbin, learning styles)</li> <li>time lines</li> <li>tips and techniques group work/discussions/brainstorming</li> <li>action planning</li> </ul> |
| step four: how am I doing?              | to review progress and reward success                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>action plans from step four</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>paired interviews</li> <li>follow-up evaluations</li> <li>personal coaching</li> <li>celebration</li> </ul>   |
| step five: what's next                  | to see what else needs to be done                            |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>repeat time logs/paired interviews to identify time problems</li> <li>action planning</li> </ul>  |

Table 1

earlier. He remained convinced that I was saying 'drive faster', and left the room in high dudgeon.

I was mortified, but struggled on to the break. At which point I learned from those delegates who knew this man that he had been sent to the seminar by his manager, and was well known for being regularly late for things and refusing to take responsibility for it.

Clearly he had felt I was challenging him personally (which, in a sense, I was). It was a great reminder for me that habits, even bad ones, are held dear. When they are 'attacked' we become very defensive about them.

### A five step model for change

When we design time management training we need to realise

why?

what?

how and when?

how am i doing?

where next?

Figure 1

that what we're actually asking people to do is change their cherished habits. However, breaking a habit doesn't mean changing some deep-seated aspect of character; people learn habits and can therefore unlearn them.

To facilitate this learning I like to use a simple, five step model (see Figure 1) for the training design, which helps delegates understand the conditions for sustained change.

Notice how the five step model is literally designed as a staircase. This is important. Whenever we create objectives for ourselves we are implicitly implying movement, and more than just forward movement – it usually involves upward (i.e. developmental) too.

The model makes the notion of moving to a better place explicit and visual for our delegates. Each step of the model is explained below, while

Table 1 provides examples of how to manage it for training design.

#### STEP 1

##### Why change?

Your goal is to inspire every delegate to want to make personal change. Everything we know about human behaviour makes it clear that unless the will is there, change probably won't happen.

#### STEP 2

##### What needs to change?

It's common for delegates not to know what they need to change. Often they come along to time management training looking for a magic pill. But there isn't one: delegates must first identify their own unhelpful time management habits so that they can tackle what's not working for them.

Recognising our habits is difficult because they're so 'natural' to us. Sometimes we don't even recognise when something is unhelpful, until we are given an opportunity to stand back and look at what we do.

**STEP 3****How will things be changed?**

The goal here is to provide a range of possibilities for delegates to choose from that will work for their personal style. Of course, you can use any number of familiar tools (Belbin, MBTI, SDI, Learning Styles, Time Lines etc) here to help delegates find the tips and techniques that will feel right for them to try.

Don't use absolutes here – i.e. say 'this is what you must do'. For example, my timeline is very much future-oriented. I thrive on diaries – I write everything I have to do in mine and am constantly looking ahead to see what's coming up.

I often fail, however, to look back at the previous day in my diary, or even the current day, to see if I've missed anything. Which I sometimes do. The solution? Every Friday I place a note in my diary reminding me to look back over the week. Simple – but it works for me.

In contrast, such an approach would be anathema to a colleague of mine, whose present timeline is very close to her – she is always completely engaged in the moment. As a result she is often late for meetings because the future always seems very far away. Solution – she now sets alarm reminders on her mobile phone.

One important caveat here: you'll probably have generated lots of ideas during this step and delegates may get carried away with what's on offer. However, having too many goals tends to lead to confused activity. When everything has priority, nothing does. It's probably a good idea to exercise caution here and decide on the one or two actions to which each really needs to pay attention.

**STEP 4****How am I doing?**

As trainers we're all very familiar with this step and its importance. Feedback – any feedback – is

powerful, provided it's focused on making progress rather than being perfect. Here it's about setting up processes – outside the initial training event or through a follow-up event – for the delegates to review the changes they have made and receive positive feedback on what they have achieved.

This is particularly important when people are making changes in habits. If they've been truly successful they will have swapped an old unhelpful habit for a new, helpful one. The new habit may, relatively quickly, have become embedded. Thus, the delegate may lose a sense of how far they've moved. It's the learning curve in action.

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**STEP 5****What's next?**

Swiftly following on from step four, this is when the delegates can revisit the initial four steps and decide on what (if anything) they want to focus on next. Why? Because there's usually more that they can do to bring back a sense of control into their working and home lives. Generally, it's feeling out of control that's the key reason for delegates to want to manage their time.

**Final thoughts**

For years I thought that there was a 'right' way, or ways, to manage time and have tried all the things that are supposed to work. Indeed, if you read any book on time man-

agement you'll see pretty much exactly this approach ('do these things and all will be rosy').

List making is a great example of this, as everything I've ever read on time management says this is a good idea. Well, it might work for others, but it's hopeless for me. I simply don't believe in that one 'right way' anymore.

What seems to work for all of us is to find out what's happening, diagnose the key problems and work on those on a way that will be congruent for each person.

Rather than giving you 'must do's' in designing time management training, I hope that I have presented a flexible process for learning within which trainers can develop a multiplicity of ideas, games, activities and information, to provide every delegate with something that works for them. ■

**References**

1. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/entertainment/bankofmumanddad>.
2. [http://www.channel4.com/life/microsites/H/how\\_clean\\_is\\_your\\_house/index.html](http://www.channel4.com/life/microsites/H/how_clean_is_your_house/index.html).
3. Named after Capt. Edward A. Murphy, an engineer working on an Air Force Project designed to see how much sudden deceleration a person can stand in a crash.
4. Parkinson's Law, 'Work expands to fill the time available for its completion' coined by British scholar and writer C. Northcote Parkinson.

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