How often do you sit down to write (or rewrite) another daily “to-do list”? When do you scroll through the dozens (or hundreds) of e-mails to decide what needs to be done next? If at the end of the day you’re still focusing on how much there is left to do, you’re missing out on one strategy that the most successful—and productive—managers know about getting things done. They regularly acknowledge accomplishment.

When you put in place strategies and tactics to help you know when you’re done, you’ll be surprised and pleased with how much you can get done. Marking things “complete” will free up time in your day so that you can focus on the areas where your attention is really needed. As a result, you’ll have a more gratifying workday, and you’ll be happier overall knowing you have more time to get to the things that are really important to you—professionally and personally. When we acknowledge (and even celebrate) completion, not only does our productivity go up, but also the people around us are automatically engaged in wanting to get more done.

It is paramount to our ongoing productivity and performance (at work and in life) that we know something has happened as a result of our efforts, that work did indeed get done, and the mission is moving (even if ever so slightly) forward. The following suggestions can help managers handle daily tasks more efficiently so that the most important projects can be effectively brought to completion.

**Take a Break**

It may seem odd to start the list with taking a break, but when it comes to completing an entire project, effective managers know when to press “pause.” A debrief, a review, a time-out, or whatever you prefer to call it is the time you block out on your calendar to reflect on what has happened.

With smaller-scale projects, the pause should be for just a few minutes to consider the problem, the solution, and the process without getting distracted by what didn’t get done.

With larger-scale projects, it’s necessary to have a systematic approach to this review. For example, identify a 30-minute block where you can meet with two or three people who were part of a recently completed project. Get together—in a conference room or on the phone—and debrief the wins of the project. Topics that should be addressed during the debrief session include:

- What worked especially well?
- What aspects did not work? What assumptions were made? What areas needed more support?
- What were the big risks we took? Did we take enough risks? How could we better prepare for the “surprise factor”?
- If money, time, and resources were not a factor, what would we do differently? What features or benefits would we add next time?
The purpose of this activity is to help you notice the completions along the way for the next project. Ultimately, you’ll close the gap between significant aspects of the project that do get done and the time it takes to acknowledge the accomplishment—whether yours or someone else’s.

WORK TOGETHER BETTER

The example that is set when one team member works effectively is significant. Set the tone for collaboration by working better together. There is great benefit when ideas are shared, work is divided, and input is provided across a diverse range of perspectives.

Successful people are able to tap into greater networks as a resource to get more done. Also, when a network is involved, there is greater reason (and pressure) to achieve and recognize completion. Likewise, a mentoring or coaching program or even an informal buddy system will improve the work/completion ratio when the individuals involved are both looking to “check things off the list.”

STOP MAJORING IN THE MINORS

Many of us spend too much time on the projects and tasks that are easy for us to complete. Then, we convince ourselves that we just didn’t have enough time to get to the more difficult things. When it comes to knowing when you’re done and freeing up time during your day, it’s essential to clear the easy tasks quickly and efficiently.

Before you start your workday, think about what your high-leverage activities are and what your low-leverage activities are. Force yourself to move through the low-leverage activities as quickly as possible, or consider bookmarking them for a day in the near future. With some of these tasks—for example, writing an e-mail to a colleague—perfection isn’t necessary, and there’s no need to waste time wringing your hands over every word. When you can accomplish the minor tasks more efficiently, you’ll have the time you need to do the major tasks justice.

Many of the clients I work with implement the following tactic. Each day, at the start of a work session, reserve a special page in your notebook (or, even a sticky note off to the side of your desk) to write down the random thoughts you have about what you need to do, such as making a quick phone call, sending a short e-mail, or getting up from your desk to put something away. Instead, collect these smaller tasks, and do them together after you have worked on one of your major projects. Clients who do this regularly report they interrupt themselves much less and experience many more (and longer) blocks of focus time during the day.

QUIT OVERSTAYING AT MEETINGS AND ON CONFERENCE CALLS

Often meetings and conference calls will take as long as you’ve allotted for them. If you set an hour for a meeting, you’re sure to go the full hour. Pay close attention to how much of your meeting is actually spent focused on the important things. If you spend 15 to 20 minutes at the beginning or end of the meeting discussing your coworker’s golf game, then
next time reduce the amount of time allotted for the meeting.

Be clear about the objectives of the meeting or conference call before you begin, and then clearly articulate those objectives at the beginning of the meeting. To the extent possible, state what you intend to accomplish or decide by the end of the meeting. If after just 30 or 35 minutes you have achieved the stated objectives, you can end the meeting early.

Another strategy to make meetings more productive is to schedule them to start on the quarter hour and to end at the top of the hour (e.g., start at 10:15 and end the meeting at 11:00). While using this strategy for client meetings, I’ve found that:

1. Meetings begin closer to the scheduled start time.
2. Meetings are shorter.
3. The 10:15 start time allows people time to collect their things—and thoughts—and actually arrive ready to meet, particularly if they are involved in back-to-back meetings.

SET YOUR OWN DEADLINES AND STICK TO THEM

It’s very easy to get distracted or sidetracked by things you think you should do or things others think you should do. Having a self-imposed deadline will help you ignore those distractions. If a colleague calls you about a nonurgent task, you can let him or her know you have a 3:00 PM deadline that you must meet. Then, as 3:00 PM draws near, start wrapping up that particular task.

Of course, in an environment where everything is high priority, or there are constant distractions going on around you, it is easy to “renegotiate” those self-imposed deadlines and add more things to the “undone” list. Here are a couple of things you can do to make deadlines work for you.

1. Break it down. If you’re going to work on a significant project and you’ve committed to completing it by Friday at 5 PM, start breaking it down on Monday, writing down the next four milestones you need to achieve between Monday and Friday afternoon. Then, at the end of each of the next four days you have a clear objective by which to measure your progress and productivity.

2. Enlist support from a friend or colleague. Call the friend or colleague and let that person know you are working on a big project and that you would like him or her to call you a couple of times—at random—over the next day or two and ask you how things are going. Simply knowing someone is going to call can sometimes kick you into another gear and help you make a little more progress on completing the project.

KNOW WHEN IT’S TIME TO ASK FOR HELP

A game-changing skill for a leader is to know when it’s time to ask for assistance. Too often, a mind-set of independence can get in the way of having a highly productive day.
It’s important to let people know what you are working on or what you need so that they can help you achieve your goals.

Here is a simple example to illustrate this point. One day in our office, Jodi was working quietly at her desk. Through that morning, and into the early afternoon, she didn’t take any phone calls and hardly moved from behind the computer. When, in the middle of the afternoon, I walked by to “check in,” I saw that she was working on a client project we had just begun the week before. I asked her how it was going. She let out a long sigh and said, “I’ve been stuck on this one part of the RFP [request for proposal] for a couple of hours now; I just can’t find all the information they need.” In an instant, I realized why Jodi was having difficulty completing her work—I had spoken with a representative from the company that morning and hadn’t yet entered the conversation notes into our customer relationship management system.

We both learned something important that day—the importance of completion and the importance of asking for help. Now, I enter information about client contacts as soon as possible, and Jodi asks for my help (via e-mail, phone/text message, or face to face) the moment she realizes she’s stuck on something that may take hours to put together.

One way to decide whether it’s time to ask for help is to walk away from the project for a while. Taking a walk around the building or around the block may help you gain more clarity about the sticking points of the project. If you can, sit down with someone over a cup of coffee or lunch and share what you’re working on; when you return to your desk, reflect on that conversation and ask: “Would I save time if I asked someone for assistance on this piece of the project?” Sometimes knowing when you’re done means knowing you can’t take a project any further without guidance, assistance, or time.

STAY FOCUSED ON THE RIGHT THINGS

At a time when economic circumstances are forcing many companies to operate with a leaner workforce, it’s more important than ever for managers to set the example for getting more of the right things done—on time and under budget. It’s also important to avoid being distracted by the seemingly never-ending to-do list and to stay focused on the high-leverage tasks of major projects.

To maintain your focus on the right things, you must plan to maximize your time and other limited resources. It is vital to your success as a leader (and consequently to the success of the organization) that you not only notice and acknowledge completion, but also actively seek it out. The ideas and strategies described here can help you acknowledge the accomplishments that you and your colleagues experience regularly. You’ll be able to have more productive days and the time, energy, and focus to get to the things you wanted to have time to do.
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