

Staying Focused to Complete Your Goals on Time

By Jeff Davidson, MBA, CMC

Have you noticed that the phones are quiet on August 15th each year? Have you noticed they're quiet on October 15th as well? It's no coincidence, because the number of people who file for extensions for personal income tax returns is on the rise. Normally, April 15th is the day of anxiety for broad masses of the American public. However, with the ability to file for a four-month automatic extension, millions have now shifted this anxiety to August the 15th. And, if you pay something both to the federal government and your state government (and who knows how you derive an estimate of what you're supposed to owe when you do finally submit all your taxes), you can actually hold up the works until October 15th.

Whether it's paying your taxes or attempting to accomplish most anything else, given the opportunity to push back the time line, many people will.

This procrastination also holds true for the goals that people set, which in turn, often keeps them from achieving their goals. The lack of a specific time line often results in not having a focused approach to attaining the goal. You don't have a clear idea of the degree to which you need to marshal your energies because the goal is open-ended.



Oh, Any Time

Suppose I say to you "I'd like you to finish that report as soon as you can." In essence, what have I just done? I have given you the opportunity to turn in the report whenever you will, because "as soon as you can" literally equates to whenever you are physically able. If anything else comes up that commands your attention, you won't be able to finish. Hence, you only need to turn in the report at some time, virtually any time in order to meet my request.

Ah, but wait, you say. "If I'm requested to turn in the report as soon as I can, isn't there an implied assumption that I will turn in the report with all due haste?" Perhaps, but not necessarily. What if in telling you to turn in the report as soon as you can, I don't realize that you have several other pressing deadlines and hence, "as soon as I can" means "after all of the other items are taken care of." From your perspective, given what you're facing, turning it in eight days from now might be as soon as you can.

A Lenient Time Line Often Means No Time Line

If you want to lose those proverbial 10 pounds, you better attach a date to your desired outcome. Otherwise, those 10 pounds can sit or maybe drop down to eight or nine, balloon up to eleven or twelve, and drop down again to seven or eight, but not get down to zero because you haven't given yourself a time line.

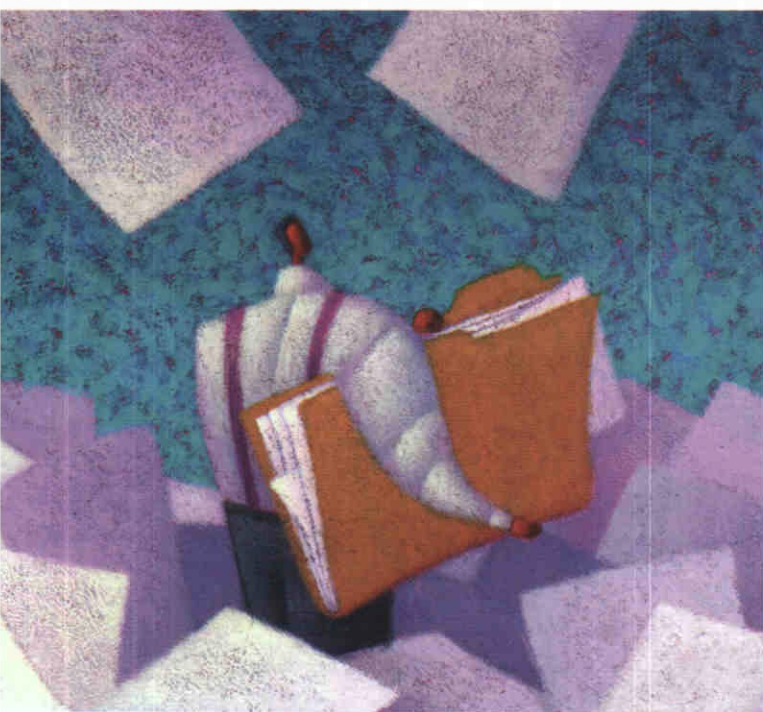
There are stories about people who set goals without time lines and achieve spectacular results. You may have even had a few such experiences yourself. In general, however, people need time lines. The probability is much higher that you'll achieve a goal if you attach a time line to it than if you don't.

You need to stick with the notion of attaching time lines to everything. Later, if you master setting and reaching your goals, and you feel you no longer need to attach time lines, you can experiment with proceeding in this manner.

No Time Line Equals No Commitment

As a self-litmus test, if you're not willing to devise a specific time line for your quantifiable challenging but reachable goal, you probably need to examine your commitment to achieving that desired outcome.

If you're experiencing the inability to get started on a project, stick to a specific time line, or achieve your desired outcome on



schedule, perhaps procrastination has a hand. No need to hide your head in shame. Everyone who has ever lived on planet Earth at one time or another has been subject to procrastination. Moreover, no one is a high gear, around-the-clock, total action machine, immediately launching into what they set out to do, however adept they are at goal setting.



The Warning Signs

Here are some of the vital indicators that you may be a frequent procrastinator:

- You're late filing your taxes (now that you know that multimillions of others do so as well, that's still not an excuse).
- You send greeting cards too late to arrive on time.
- You shop for Christmas presents on December 24th.
- You have a health check-up only months after suspecting that something is wrong.
- You have drawers in your desk, files in your cabinet, whole closets, or whole rooms that are total disaster areas and you've been "meaning to get to" for oh, so long.
- You actually begin some projects after the deadline because you need that kind of anxiety to get you going.

People are more likely to delay taking action when they perceive that something is difficult, unpleasant, or represents a difficult choice. Those adept at setting and reaching their goals understand the importance of setting time lines and adhering to them so that procrastination cannot become an issue.

Unpleasing Means for Pleasing Ends

Much of what you may need to do to achieve a desired outcome may not please you while you're doing it. Jogging for many miles to reduce your waistline, or saving more and spending less will not necessarily make you feel better on any given day. One fine day, however, when your waistline is at the trim target you've chosen, or your savings account has grown to a healthy balance, you begin to understand that less than pleasing means contributed to the highly pleasing outcome.

One of the better ways to handle critical tasks that you prefer not to do is to handle them first. That way, you have something to look forward to, given that the more pleasing tasks await. Anytime you have discretion over the order in which you tackle steps or sub-goals on the way to achieving a goal, attempt to handle the seemingly unpleasant elements first. If you don't, and if you practice the converse—doing what you like to do first, and saving the unpleasant things for last—the probability of procrastinating increases.

Keep the Excuses Under Control

You don't want to let procrastination prevent you from your successful conclusion. When you handle the unpleasant tasks first, you diminish the possibility of procrastination becoming an issue.

If you put off engaging in activities and experiences that are truly meaningful for you, over and over again, you will miss out on the magic and majesty of your life.

When you plot on paper what you're going to do and by when, you reduce the incidences of not getting started on time. However, since you're a full-fledged human being and may tend to procrastinate more times than you care to admit, here are a variety of ideas for helping you to break through any self-imposed limits to getting started on something:

- Share your deadlines with others to engender the support they may provide.
- Visualize yourself having completed the task you're having trouble getting started on.
- Offer yourself small rewards, reinforcement, as you complete certain aspects of the undesirable task.
- Set up rest or break times, so that the activity doesn't seem so onerous.
- If you're having a hard time getting started, promise yourself that you'll engage in the task for only five minutes. After five minutes, you have the option of stopping or continuing. Fortunately, many times once you get in motion, you're more than willing to continue.
- As cited previously, schedule the less enjoyable tasks first. However, if you still can't get started, start anywhere, even on something you enjoy doing, because that may be a spur for you to tackle the less enjoyable portions of the task.
- Clear your desk of everything, except the materials related to the task at hand. The less visual distractions that you have, the greater is the probability you can stay focused on the task at hand.
- Look for a partner, even for a few minutes, who can help you get started. It helps especially if you can find a trail blazer, someone who's already had to tackle what you currently face.
- Play one task off against another. If task A is terrible, but task B is worse, perhaps in this context, A doesn't look so bad, and you can get started on it.
- Give yourself a preview. If you have to tackle something on Monday that you've been putting off, it's often helpful to briefly view the project on Friday, so that when you return to it on Monday you have some semblance of familiarity with the particulars. This can also work during the middle of the week, before you leave for vacation, and anytime when there will be a few days or a few hours between when you preview the item and actually work on it.

If All Else Fails, Do Something

If none of the above get you going, then be prepared to miss out on achieving your goal. Get real with yourself, and admit to yourself when you procrastinate. If you make excuses or rationalize as to why you're not getting started, you open up the door to doing

it again and again. If you're honest with yourself and acknowledge when you are procrastinating, then you're that much closer to taking action.

Even the smallest action pursued of some action or long-term goal is far better than nothing.

Small Steps Do Add Up

Suppose you want to make a major job change entirely out of your field into something you've never attempted before. Rather than contemplating week after week, month after month, and even year after year of how it will be when you make the change, accomplish one small task in pursuit of your desired outcome starting now.

One man wanted to be a movie script writer but didn't know how he would ever make the transition from his job as a foreman in a manufacturing plant. So, he initiated a three-year goal of leaving his job to become a full-time script writer. During the interim, he established a daily goal of spending a minimum of fifteen minutes working on scripts. Some evenings he was able to get two or three pages completed. Some evenings, he was only able to go as far as a paragraph. He also scheduled to attend script writing seminars and workshops, read articles and books on the topic, and even joined an association of script writers and attended their meetings.

A year and a half into his program, he still checks in every day at the manufacturing plant and still draws 100% of his pay as a foreman. Yet, he is enthusiastic about the progress he's making and is mustering a growing potential for making his living as a movie script writer.

Using a Time Log

Some people find it useful to use a time log to record exactly how they use their time in a given day or week, and see how that aligns with the goals they've set for themselves.

A time log can be as simple as a two-column chart down the page that chronologically lists each activity and how much time you engage in it, as you proceed throughout a day. Here is the simplest of time logs (*see the two column time log at right*).

If it's helpful and convenient for you, separate your time log into personal time versus professional time or before work, during work, and after work, or any other division that suits your purpose.

What Do You Notice?

Often, after reviewing several days or weeks worth of time logs, you'll notice some trends. Nothing eye popping or earth shaking. Nevertheless, for many people there is a curious phenomenon at play. Those things that they've selected as important to achieve, their goals, do not seem to be getting the time and attention based on the time logs, that such important and desirable outcomes would merit.

Most people have little correlation between their stated goals and how they expend their time on any given day. Some find that they have to simply drop activities altogether in pursuit of what's truly important to them.

SIMPLE TWO COLUMN TIME LOG

Arise, shower and dress for work	30 minutes
Eat breakfast, read paper	30 minutes
Commute to work	45 minutes
Review in basket mail and e-mail	45 minutes
Meet with staff	25 minutes
Dictate three letters	30 minutes
Continue adding to project report	90 minutes
Lunch at desk	30 minutes
Continue on project report	35 minutes
Meet with division boss	15 minutes
Attend expansion project meeting	60 minutes
Make personal calls	10 minutes
Online research	20 minutes
Online fooling around	10 minutes
Respond to today's mail	20 minutes
Commute home	45 minutes
Pick up a few items	15 minutes
Dinner with family	35 minutes
Review projects brought home from work	30 minutes
Spend 10 minutes with child	20 minutes
Watch an hour television program	60 minutes
Spend time with spouse	15 minutes
Read for a few minutes	10 minutes
Get ready for bed	15 minutes

What Gets Dropped, What Can Be Combined?

If your time log is in conflict with your goals, it's time to make choices, i.e., watching television is relaxing, but is it as important as exercising during that time? Certain activities lend themselves to doubling up, such as exercising while you watch television. Because you don't need to give your sharp attention to the television set, you can concentrate on exercising, and consider anything you do pick up from the show that's worthwhile as gravy.

Your Undivided, Sharp Attention

When does it not make sense to double up on activities?—When compromising your sharp attention is risky. You don't want to shave or put on your makeup, as so many people are starting to do, in the mornings on the way into work, while driving. Driving requires your sharp attention, and putting on makeup or shaving also requires sharp attention and hence, you can't give your sharp attention to two different activities at the same time.

You may drive and listen to a CD or cassette, and you may drive and talk to others. As I've elaborated in *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Managing Stress*, many people fall into the trap of routinely doubling up on activities in the quest to get more done. However, this seldom carries the benefits that they initially sought.

If you read at the kitchen table while you eat, you don't taste and enjoy your food to the degree that you could, and you don't absorb what you're reading with the retention rate you're capable of. Nevertheless, you're not going to bounce off a highway guardrail if you eat while you read, so if this is one of your pleasures, keep at it.

Assigning Times to Your Goal

Assigning times to your goal is not a complex issue. In some cases, a deadline is imposed from an external source. Or, you may be engaged in an activity where the time lines are obvious, such as if you're participating on a team in sports, entering into some work related contest, and so on.

If you set too short a time line for a challenging but reachable goal, you may render that goal unreachable. Conversely, if you allow too much time, the goal may no longer be challenging.

Be Prepared to Shift

Like the pilot of an airplane constantly readjusting during the flight, you may find yourself shifting time lines as you become more knowledgeable of the realities of accomplishing your desired goal. Again, this is not an excuse to let you change your time lines at will, but simply an acknowledgment that planning to pursue a goal, and actually pursuing it represent different kinds of activities. The latter yields far more information as to the feasibility of your initial plan.

Budget a Little More Time Than Feels Natural

Highly successful people have the habit, paradoxically, of sometimes underestimating the time it will take to accomplish things, because they've accomplished so much in the past. If you fall into this category, cut yourself some slack when you assign time lines.

If you think an activity is going to take ten hours, perhaps it would make sense to budget 1.2 to 1.5 times the time, in other words, 12 to 15 hours. Then, if you finish earlier, you'll feel good. Conversely, if you attempt to handle a 12 to 15 hour project in 10 hours, you may feel rushed and anxious the entire time.

Allow for down time, particularly on maintenance and continuing goals. Suppose that you have to turn in a report every Thursday afternoon by 4 p.m., as a standard part of your job responsibility. To meet that recurring deadline, it makes sense to allow for contingencies.

Murphy is Alive and Well

Sometimes, things will go wrong, and more often than any of us care to have happen.

- What if your PC goes haywire?
- What if the power gets turned off?
- What if your car breaks down on the way into work?

These and a variety of other low probability, yet nagging occurrences, require that you put some backup systems in place, such as always backing up your hard disk, having an alternate means of transportation, and even having a laptop computer with its own battery fully charged and ready to go. It also means scheduling your time so that you won't finish at 3:55, but rather 2:55, or more preferably 1:55, or even early that morning!

Do You Call Instead of Appear?

If you have to travel to someone's office for an appointment and the trip will be 15 minutes, and you know you'll be late, at the



least, call at 2:45. A call at 3 to say you'll be late is already late. To be courteous and professional, at the least, you'd call at the first moment that you knew you'd be late.

But An Appointment is No Big Deal

In case you're thinking that an appointment is a relatively small thing in the grand scope of life, it is. Calling in late is the often harbinger, however, of other difficulties when it comes to meeting time lines.

Think about the people you know who are always running late. Aren't these the same people who are continually frustrated and anxious about missing deadlines, taking on too much, and not scheduling their time accordingly? How good a job will they do when it comes to assigning time lines to goals that are important to them? Probably not well at all.

The critical factor at all times in pursuing your goals, is managing yourself. Guard against taking on too much at once and allowing yourself to procrastinate as you keep focused on attaining your goals. ■

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