

BY JEFF DAVIDSON

ONE THING AT A TIME

Increase your productivity by slowing down

Every day, virtually all city and county managers and their staffs engage in multitasking. This might feel temporarily satisfying, but multitasking cannot compete with the long-term productivity of handling one thing at a time.

To become a master of doing one thing at a time, pick an activity—work related or not—that you enjoy and where there's a high probability that you can engage in that activity without doing anything else. It could be driving your car with the radio off or reading in your favorite armchair without having a snack.

THE MORE OFTEN YOU CAN GET INTO THE HABIT OF DOING ONE THING AT A TIME, THE BETTER YOU'LL DO, AND THE MORE TIME WILL SLOW DOWN FOR YOU.

Start with small segments. If you're reading in your favorite armchair, promise yourself you'll go 10 minutes without any snacks the first night. The second night, go 15 minutes, then 20, and so forth. Eventually, you might get to the point where you can read for an hour or more without having to resort to snacks.

If you're trying to engage in reading, conceptual or breakthrough thinking, or creative problem solving, find as quiet a place as possible. Your ultimate goal will be to focus on work-related tasks one at a time, so that your concentration and quality of performance goes up, your anxiety level goes down, and the clock slows down.

Tackle One Key Task

When you're surrounded by tasks competing for your attention, identify the one that's most important to tackle and stay

with it until completion, or for as long as you can. If you're temporarily pulled away by something else, return to the important task at hand and, again, stay with it to completion, or for as long as you can.

When you have no choice but to handle a multiplicity of items competing for your attention, practice the ability to give at least short bursts of your full attention to the task at hand, before turning to something else that begs your attention.

If you've ever noticed airline reservation personnel in the middle of a pressure situation, you know what

I mean. Suppose the plane is going to be leaving in a matter of minutes, and several passengers have arrived late.

Rather than trying to deal with three or four passengers at the same time, the ticket agent deals with one person and ticket situation at a time, often not even raising his head from the computer screen. He is ensuring the ticket will be correct once it's printed.

The same observation can be made of a bank teller, a bus driver, or a construction worker walking on scaffolding five stories above the ground. Indeed, when you look around, you find all kinds of people who are adept at doing one thing at a time.

Other habits can also help you master this habit:

- Initiate personal balancing techniques. Take deep breaths, stare out the window, envision yourself tackling the

situation easily, or close your eyes for a few seconds before confronting the task again.

- Observe the people in your organization who concentrate well. What do they do differently than the rest? Talk to them, learn from them.
- Bring earplugs to work, if it's necessary. Use a sound screen if it helps.
- Encourage others to join your mission to increase your powers of concentration.

Some Wiggle Room

While you need to disengage in multitasking far more than you realize, there are times when it's perfectly permissible to do more than one thing at a time.

Most of those times occur away from work. Obviously, at dinner with a friend or loved one you'll be talking and eating simultaneously. Generally, it's okay to drive and listen to the radio, CDs, or your iPod. The exception is when the decibel level is so high that your concentration is impaired.

The issue becomes foggy when it comes to using a cell phone and driving. Both have the potential to diminish your concentration and increase your probability of being involved in an accident. Some people argue that cell phones come with speakers, so you can hold a phone conversation while keeping both hands on the wheel.

The problem with engaging in conversation and performing other tasks is that speaking requires far more brain activity than the passive act of listening to the radio or a CD player. If you insist on engaging in conversations while using your cellphone in the car, perhaps it's best for you to pull off to the side of the road.

The more often you can get into the habit of doing one thing at a time, the better you'll do, and the more time will slow down for you. **PM**



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