

Reclaiming a Balanced Life: Reinventing Our Schedules

William Mathis

Are you and your family feeling the pressures of the chaotic and changing environment in the management field? Is the resulting stress hindering your ability to maintain a balanced family or personal life?

From top executives to front-line employees, everyone is feeling challenged to cope in this turbulent climate. Extensive changes in our work environment since 1985 have required revisiting how we schedule and conduct our lives. With the increasing speed of decision making and communications via fax, pager, cellphone, and the Internet, decisionmakers have had to accelerate their processes tenfold.

Work routines have been redefined through the extension of outsourcing and outtasking and the increase in competition, personal responsibilities, and the "just-in-time" pace of transactions. It is this environment of change that has begun to create a crisis-oriented lifestyle that negatively affects how we prioritize our daily schedules. Public managers can feel this crisis even more because of the need to keep balance and stability in their personal and professional lives.

The need for relief becomes more important as managers find themselves at the vortex of change and struggling to maintain the integrity of their customers' work environments while in the midst of a business revolution. Managers face unique problems in providing customers with service

through all hours of the day. Many people in the profession have assumed a role similar to that of an emergency room doctor, dealing with triaging *all the problems* of customers, from financial crises to lost FedEx packages. The challenge of maintaining quality, or “prime,” time for managers and their families without compromising service is intense. Clearly, if you want a personal life in these times, you must reinvent your schedule.

As a management psychologist working to help executives through the perils of personal change management, I recommend seven basic principles. These seven tenets require a personal appraisal of life, both at work and at home, and call for setting aside time, often with a professional guide, to prioritize and think through to completion those areas of most distress.

The principles have arisen out of the experiences and comments of management professionals who have successfully begun the transition to a balanced life by reinventing their schedules.

Principle 1. Set personal goals. “Pressure can cause you to lower your standards. Don’t give in; you can’t jeopardize your values and reputation.”—City Manager, Florida.

If you don’t know where you’re going, chances are you won’t get anywhere. In that case, any old time management book can help you. In this frenetic time, however, placing personal and family goals first can only be achieved with advance planning and a definite model. Set your personal goals, and then prioritize them. A good place to start with personal goal setting is with a desk audit, both at home and at the office.

This process will provide a quick overview of everything currently affecting the use of your time and will serve as an immediate baseline from which to begin your personal goal-setting effort. To begin, list every communication, plan, phone message, request, and invitation crossing your desk (don’t forget the car phone).

Planning that has been completed

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and then acted upon fosters a more positive attitude. Planning and merging personal priorities with work priorities offers you choices for how you spend your “prime” time. It is amazing that so many managers are too busy to make formal decisions about how they schedule their lives. Don’t let others dictate your family and personal plan; setting personal goals is the crucial first step in the process of reinventing your schedule.

Principle 2. Develop positive habits. Generating positive habits and adding positive activities can lead the busy person into avenues of great satisfaction and renewal. A love of skiing can lead to adventures with new friends in exciting locations. Reading three books off the bestseller list can be inspiring, especially if you are adventurous and open-minded. Tennis and golf can be more enjoyable if you try new locations, partners, or instructors. Setting new short-term goals can lead to more positive and varied habits, and developing positive habits will create an attitude that supports healthy balance and reinforces personal growth. Positive addictions can spell relief for many of us without having to think about it.

Principle 3. Encourage family support and involvement. “This business could easily be a 24-hour-a-day job. You must physically get away from it for perspective.”—Fired City Manager, California.

People need nurturing and a sense of belonging as never before. We all want personal stability in a time of increasing uncertainty and change. The involvement of family in our planning eliminates obstacles, reduces crises, and positively reinforces a personal direction. Real family planning occurs when family members dream and plan realistically about their future, recognizing the pleasures of living together. Many families set aside time for regular monthly sessions or “council meetings” so each member may individually express his or her wants and needs and the family can make plans accordingly.

While sharpening planning skills is beneficial, scheduling events with extended family and friends as well as immediate family often will reinforce a sense of well-being in the most chaotic life. If you find yourself dreading some planned family event, it is usually because you did not provide adequate time for your own personal needs. “Extended family” can include old friends who contribute positive influences and attitudes to your life. They like you just the way you are and can communicate this approval every time they are around. Both family and friends are support networks that nurture a sense of well-being and are essential to a balanced life.

Principle 4. Plan for daily personal quiet time. “Our litigation society causes stress because we spend much time avoiding problems.”—Police Chief, Maryland.

Daily personal quiet time is a requirement in our world. Personal quiet time involves shutting out pressures and, in a quiet place where you can be alone, asking yourself key questions to help determine the importance of activities and events that demand your time and attention. You might ask, “What is the best use of my time? Will something still matter tomorrow? And “Who benefits from my doing this particular task?” Interpreting and understanding your thoughts and feelings requires time and

patience. Planning daily personal quiet time will greatly increase your ability to identify the priorities in your life.

Principle 5. Begin a personal fitness program. Personal fitness activities must be part of every schedule, for people cannot achieve balanced lives while neglecting their bodies. An accumulation of pressure and tension in the shoulders and lower back should signal a need for meditation, yoga, or other regular exercise.

A positive and active fitness program should be varied and entertaining. If it bores you, it may become an obstacle to personal achievement and health. Varieties of exercise and regularity of effort are the keys to a successful fitness regimen.

Principle 6. Create a controlled financial plan. "Can't do a five-year plan any more. The management mar-

ket is too volatile and dynamic."—City Manager, Ohio.

Devising a controlled financial plan and adhering to it will prevent reactive and crisis spending and promote balanced living. It is easy to justify impulsive spending in a crisis-oriented life. Every family will benefit from a budget and an agreement on family spending priorities, which will need to include individual requirements, entertainment, personal needs, and savings. The discipline required to follow a family financial plan is both an individual commitment and a challenge to leading a balanced life.

Principle 7. Practice kindness and openness. Many old sayings demonstrate the value of giving of ourselves, but few people have seen kindness as a way of maintaining a healthy balance within their own lives. Acknowledging and attending to others' needs, however,

requires personal organization and an openness to different points of view. Personal balance has much to do with being receptive to other people's thoughts, ideas, and perspectives.

Though kindness and openness often are difficult to practice, the benefits are great and extremely rewarding. How you manage the chaos in your life and the crises in others' will dictate how you spend your prime time. Reinventing your schedule to create a more balanced life will require active use of these seven principles. Look at your calendar immediately, and include all seven now. **END**

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