



How to manage your time

**7 tips for doing
what matters most**

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Most people wish for more time, but what would you fill it with? If your answer is more of the same — more projects, more interruptions for requests from others, more checking email — then that's like saying the solution to your cluttered garage is a second garage to fill up.

Instead, you need a system that lets you organize and invest your time more effectively so you can, as one manager described to us, “maintain progress on your longer-term goals while balancing the fires that occur on a daily basis.” Additionally, as more and more team members work remotely, effective time management is essential to ensure progress to achieve quality work, family, and self.



“Are the 7 Habits® as relevant today as they were when they were first created? Absolutely, they are more relevant than ever before. The greater the change, the more difficult the challenges, the more relevant the 7 Habits become. Why? Because they are based on principles of effectiveness that endure.”

— Stephen R. Covey

1. Use the Time Matrix[®] to focus the bulk of your time on important work.

FranklinCovey's **Time Matrix** can help you visualize how you're spending your time, and open your eyes and your proactive brain to how you'll need to change if you want to get more important work done.





So how does your current workload rank on the “axis of important” and “axis of urgent”?

As you map common tasks and activities onto the Time Matrix quadrants, consider:

- **What in Quadrant 2 should I invest more time in?**
It is easy to focus on Q1 and put off tasks in Q2, but investing more time in Q2 will make you more effective and help you achieve the results you want.
- **Which problems in Quadrant 1 might I be able to avoid by spending more time on Quadrant 2 tasks like better planning or communication?** Let's say you show your manager a draft of a report due to the executive team that you waited until the last minute to work on, and it's way off base. You'll spend the next day (and night) fixing it. But what if you had proactively started sooner, asked more questions at the outset, then asked your manager for regular feedback throughout the process?

- **What could I reduce or eliminate from Quadrants 3 and 4?** Am I answering a million emails, thinking if I just get that done, I can get to more important things but don't quite get to them? Am I doing social media to excess, taking time away from more important accomplishments?

Some tasks don't fit tidily into the quadrants, and sometimes it's hard to tell ahead of time where they belong. For example, you may assume a meeting is important and discover halfway through that you didn't need to be there. Discern through the Time Matrix to help you make better decisions about where to spend your time.



Activities that represent your mission, roles, values, and high-priority goals will always fall in the important but most likely nonurgent category.

2. Ask questions that will help you decide what's important and what's urgent.



What's one thing you could start doing that would make a significant difference in your work life?

As a busy professional, you face hundreds of possible ways to use your time every week. Without clear criteria, you're likely to fall into the common trap of trying to do it all, while failing to do that which is most important. Simply reacting to whatever tasks come your way, rather than proactively setting your agenda, is a recipe for being busy, not productive.

Questions like these can help you gauge how important a task is against its impact on results, which quadrant it is in, and when it truly needs to be done:

- How much will doing this help me, my team, or my company meet an important goal?
- If I do this now, how big will the payoff be in a week, a month, or a year?
- How long could it wait before it needs my attention—a week, a month, a year, or forever?
- Am I the best or only person to do this?
- How much am I drawn to this because it feels comfortable or easy for me?

In running through these kinds of questions, you may determine it's worth dropping everything to share a critical update with your colleagues, since the new information may impact their work on a key goal or speed the team's progress. Or you may decide now's a good time to start a project to give yourself some breathing room to make sure it is done on time and with quality.

If you just stay reactive without discerning priorities, you may realize you're flooding your week with "quick win" tasks that won't win you much of anything in the long run. Or you may find you're favoring a project that leverages your existing skills while avoiding other responsibilities that would force you to stretch. By asking good questions and being very intentional, you can make the highest-value decisions to accomplish what matters most.



One practice will balance your life and increase your productivity more than any other: Plan your week before the week begins.

3. Make your well-being and development one of your top priorities.



Add exercise, meditation, relaxation, and healthy food to your daily routine to help you be successful.

Too often, busy people put their own physical and emotional needs, as well as their professional-development goals, last on their to-do list.

There are many reasons why. Some believe it's noble to put the needs of their colleagues or organization before their own. Or maybe they don't want to seem like slackers, so they stay at their desk whether — in the office or working remotely — instead of taking a break, getting some exercise, or investing the time to learn a new skill.

If you're constantly giving energy to your job without replenishing it, you'll end up depleted — and ineffective. Instead, talk to your manager about a learning goal in your next 1-on-1. And pay attention to how your sleep, exercise, stress levels, and eating habits affect your energy level and your mood.



Reinvigorate your attitude and creative juices by stepping away from your desk to give your brain time and space to recharge.

4. Plan your day and week around your three to five most important activities.



In order to focus on the work with the highest impact, you need to have a clear sense of what's most important.

It may sound counterintuitive to spend more time planning and scheduling if you're already so busy you can't even get your most important work done.

But research suggests that if the important stuff gets planned and scheduled, it's far more likely to get done.

Try this process:

- **30 minutes once a week:** Give your brain the time it needs to identify the three to five most important things you can do in the coming week to be effective. Consider your goals, what could set up your manager or colleagues for success, and important personal activities like exercise. Schedule these priorities on your calendar for the coming week.
- **10 minutes each day:** Be intentional about marking those most important things complete (yay!), moving those that were not completed to another time slot on another day, and adjust your calendar as needed. Even with your best intentions, you may get pulled away for emergencies not on your list, or an important or required task may take longer than you expected. Daily planning gives you a chance to acknowledge your accomplishments and recommit time for what's important every day.

Once the time for key activities is booked and tracked with weekly and daily planning, you can fill in the rest of your calendar with update meetings, one-off requests, blocking time for email, and other tasks.



**“The key is not to
prioritize what’s on
your schedule, but
to schedule your
priorities.”**

— Stephen R. Covey

5. Talk about your top priorities with others.



Think proactively about how sharing information might help others.

Several great things can happen when you share your priorities. Your goals become better aligned with those of your colleagues. You feel more accountable for your most important work — you've said it out loud, so you'd better deliver.

You can also influence others to adopt a similar focus:

- **Your manager:** Even if you know what's important to your manager, it's worth checking often to be sure you're in sync. Try sending a weekly update of your top priorities. And when your manager piles on a new task, clarify together where it should fit on your priority list. This approach keeps you on track and helps your boss understand everything you're juggling.

For example:

"I want to be sure I'm prioritizing correctly. When does this need to be done? I also have those other two important projects on my plate and may need to adjust deadlines if I do this first."

- **Your peers:** When sharing your priorities, ask your peers about theirs too. You don't want to make a project a top priority, only to discover that someone you'll rely on for a critical piece won't be available to help. Getting more big-picture context from your peers may also give you ideas for new goals.



In today's world, we can't just go on the "I have a busy life" autopilot and expect to end up where we want to be.

6. Learn how to say no to requests that aren't a good use of your time.



Saying no is actually a way of saying yes — to yourself and the things that matter most to you.

If you're a helpful person by nature, you may find it hard to resist a colleague's plea for help. After all, if you say yes, the person will be happy. You will have built goodwill. You'll feel relevant and involved.

But if you say yes too often, how are you achieving what you determined matters most?

There are plenty of ways to say no very proactively without coming across as rude, and still be a team player. For example:

In a positive tone, thank the person for asking.

"Thanks for asking, and it sounds like an important project."

This signals respect and will soften the blow of the "no" to follow.

Explain the impact the request would have on you or your team.

"We have a big launch next Thursday, and this would cause us to miss our deadline by several days."

Often people don't realize the trade-offs that would be required to do what they're asking.

Provide another solution if you can. If you don't have time to fulfill the request, do you know someone who might? Your ideas may be just as valuable as your time.

When you feel tempted to say yes, ask for time to think it through. A simple answer might be:

"Could I get back to you this afternoon?"

This might save you from a hasty "yes" when you've been caught off guard.



If you're constantly giving energy to your job without replenishing it, you'll end up depleted — and ineffective.

7. Assess your time-management system frequently.



While good technologies can help us in the battle, it's the Q2 mindset that helps us win.

Life is always changing, whether in the world, or your organization, or in you. What matters most is highly dynamic and needs to be evaluated constantly.

Use the steps above to recalibrate what's important now and what's not important going forward. In your long-term planning, as well as your weekly and daily planning, utilize the Time Matrix process of discernment consistently.

The tools you use to manage your time will certainly evolve over time, but the Quadrant 2 mindset will serve you well in every circumstance. Practice it until it becomes as habitual as tying your shoes or brushing your teeth.



30TH ANNIVERSARY

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Your organization's success depends on strong individual performance.

No matter how competent your people are, they won't generate sustained and lasting results unless they're able to effectively lead themselves; influence, engage, and collaborate with others; and continually improve and renew their capabilities.

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