

# Coping with Disruption

## A Practical Time Management Technique

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What are your greatest time management challenges? We all have them, don't we? No one's figured out how to turn down the speed dial on the pace of life. Every day is another juggling match with the limited number of hours and minutes at our disposal.

Moreover, our culture's preoccupation with achievement and success puts continued pressure on us to squeeze every ounce of productivity possible out of the day. We therefore constantly look for shortcuts to give us more time.

In planning our daily schedule, however, there's one thing which is often omitted from our planning. And yet, it has more impact on what we get done than just about anything else. Today's podcast therefore gives it its due. I hope you'll join us, because the next 20 minutes are sure to help you upsize your leadership.

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I've had several corporate engagements which included leadership training for relatively new managers – people with less than three years in a managerial post.

Early in the training, I typically ask, "What have been your greatest surprises as a manager?" Almost without exception, someone will say, "All the people problems you have to deal with." And the nodding heads around the room confirm that everyone else feels the same way.

If I then ask what else has been a surprise, the immediate answer is not so predictable. But the most common one is, "How hard it is to get things done because of all the disruptions." This time, my head is nodding with others in the room. Disruptions sometimes seem to be my way of life.

What about you? How do you react to disruptions? If you're like most, they become a distraction at best, a frustration in all likelihood. Clients often tell me, "I've gotten nothing done today, because it has been one disruption after another."

So, let's talk about that for a moment, shall we? What makes disruptions so frustrating? And what determines how frustrating they will be? From my experience, the root cause for the frustration is the number of urgent items on our "to do" list. If my day is already packed with

things which simply must get done, every disruption burns up time that could otherwise be given to checking off something which absolutely demands my time today.

In fact, my frustration is directly proportional to how many items like that are on the day's schedule. If the urgent "must-do" list is relatively short, it's usually not difficult to take the disruption in stride, with no particular emotional upset. However, as the must-do list grows longer, so too does the level of aggravation we feel when disruptions occur.

I know that aggravation firsthand. At one time, it was a major source of daily frustration that often poured over into resentment of those behind the disruption. Then I had a conversation one day that put the cause of my frustration in an altogether new perspective. Now, I'm not saying that disruptions no longer aggravate me. They still do. But not as often. And not as intently.

The change came as the result of sage advice from a beloved friend and mentor. I was in my early thirties. I was pushing hard, accomplishing a lot, but always time-strapped. I complained to him one day about all the daily disruptions that upset my well-planned day. Thanks to the disruptions, my daily "to do" list never seemed to get finished.

"Your problem," he answered, "is that you don't have a well-planned day at all. You think you do. But you don't. You've left one critical item out of your daily plan."

"What's that?" I asked.

"You've not planned for disruptions," he replied. "You've packed your day to the hilt, without allowing for anything to go wrong or for unexpected demands on your time."

He was absolutely right. Whenever a disruption came along, my first thought was, "I don't have time for this!" I resented the disruption. It was costing me time for my "to do" list. Before long, resentment turned to frustration. Impatience soared. I got testy with people. And at the end of the day, I didn't feel all that good about myself.

Interestingly, I should have seen this coming. When I first started experiencing this daily frustration, I concluded that I was simply not good enough at planning my day and holding to my schedule. I determined I would do something about that. I started reading time management books. I attended time management seminars. I became a slave to my daily planning log. I even began teaching workshops on time management.

Yet, the result was not a decrease in frustration, but an increase. Why? Because armed with all of these wonderful time-saving tips, I didn't free up any time. I simply found more ways to cram more things onto my daily to-do list.

In fact, after a few years of teaching time management, I quit offering my workshop. What I found is that people were not using what I taught them to free up time on their schedule for things which were truly important as opposed to urgent. They simply jammed more things onto their calendar.

I recognized what they were doing, because it was the very thing which I had done when I was in their place, back when I was making my first applications of what I had learned from some recent time management course. You see, I had begun offering my own time management programs out of a desire to help people in my church find more time to give to things like family,

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community service, personal enrichment, uncovering their purpose in life – things which in the long run are what's most important in our life.

Over the months following a workshop, I would follow up with people to learn about their progress in making more time for the truly important. To my chagrin, most of them had made no progress at all. As I mentioned earlier, they merely used what they learned from me as a tool for shoehorning even more urgent things into their daily schedule, still at the expense of the truly important. Their important things still languished on the sideline.

After I recognized this recurring pattern, I decided that my time management courses were making matters worse for people, not better. So, I dropped them from my own to-do list and have never taught one since.

My mentor had seen me making the same improper use of my time management training that I would later see in those who took my courses. I readily realized what they were simply repeating my own mistake.

Going back to that life-altering conversation with my mentor, I took his advice to heart. I purposefully began organizing my day around a different framework. In effect, I pre-planned for disruptions as I laid out the day.

I started by making a list of things which needed to be done and which I could realistically achieve over the course of the day if absolutely nothing went wrong. Then, I pulled off of this list those things which absolutely had to be done. I compiled them in what I called my "must do" list. Everything left became my "good to do" list. But while things on the "good to do" list needed to be done, it wasn't mandatory to complete them today.

Next, I conditioned myself to build my daily expectations around the "must do" list. I told myself each morning, "If I only get these 'must-do' things done today, my day will be a success."

I then devoted the day's discretionary time to items on the "must do" list. I disciplined myself to focus on them tenaciously. Only when I had lined off every one of them did I turn to anything on the "good to do" list.

If disruptions popped up (and they usually did), I found time for them by foregoing lower priority items on the "good to do" list. Sometimes disruptions preempted any time whatsoever to work on the "good to do" list. But that was okay. After all, nothing on the list had to be done today, anyway.

When I began using this approach, I noticed a distinct and almost immediate change in my attitude. I quit feeling that people were imposing on me when they brought me a thorny problem. I quit being so upset when equipment malfunctioned and threw me off schedule. I quit resenting the person who "wasted my time" by letting a meeting run long.

Over the ensuing years, this approach served me well in managing my daily schedule — what I might call my "micro-schedule." But looking back, I see that I failed to apply it rigorously enough to my "macro-schedule," i.e., my larger pattern of life-commitments.

I eventually came to see that my challenge in managing my "micro-schedule" were largely the result of inadequately managing my "macro-schedule." My "macro-schedule" had gradually added more and more things to my plate, until something had to give.

You've probably had times like that yourself. Demands here. Commitments there. Not enough hours in the day. Not enough days in the week.

We typically get into situations like this gradually, not overnight. We wedge an additional commitment into our schedule today. Tomorrow we wedge in two more. Next week we add still another. Perhaps none of these commitments are all that big, all that time-consuming. But little by little they add up.

Then one day we realize that we are totally unfocused. A thousand distractions are diverting our attention and taking our eye off the ball. We no longer feel effective. The satisfaction of a job well done is more and more elusive.

Or perhaps another scenario plays out. Perhaps we are already burning the candle at both ends, as the expression goes. Then, along comes a major disruption. A prolonged illness. A crisis in the family. A wholesale personal tragedy. An unforeseen financial setback. Where on earth will we find time to cope with this new development? We come face-to-face with the reality that we have allowed our life to get so filled with high priority commitments that there is no time for wholesale disruptions. Our month-to-month cannot accommodate a disruption which lasts more than a day or two.

When a huge disruption like this comes along, we usually just wedge it into the calendar, driving it in with a sledgehammer, if need be. We sleep a little less. We put in an extra hour or two each day. We try to do more multi-tasking.

But it is like driving a wedge into a piece of timber. At some point things have to start breaking apart. And for me, they eventually did.

I finally realized that I needed to re-engineer my "macro-schedule" just as thoroughly as I had once re-engineered my "micro-schedule." It was not only my daily schedule which was overcrowded with too many obligations, my overall schedule was equally overburdened with too many commitments.

So I spent the next few months coping with the disruptions, but also starting to realign the priorities on my "macro-schedule." Literally, I've been doing that for years, and the re-engineering is far from finished. But I'm working at it diligently.

It's far more difficult than I first imagined, because these large-scale commitments are on my macro-schedule for a reason: I have genuine affection for them. They really mean a lot to me. Reducing my commitment to them or eliminating them altogether is emotionally difficult, almost gut-wrenching at times.

Which has led me to a new "lesson learned." When we are young, with schedules packed and lots of to-do's on our list, we fantasize about what it will be like when we are older, slow down, and don't have so many commitments tugging at us.

For me, however — and probably for most people — the commitments that tug have grown more numerous with each passing year. The longer we live, the larger our family. The more extensive our network of friends. The more numerous the experiences that draw us into some new, fulfilling opportunity.

We take these new members of our family, these new friends, these fulfilling opportunities into our bosom. We incorporate them into our very sense of identity. They become part of us. And to give up commitments to them is like giving up part of our very self.

Perhaps you've heard people say, "I retired five years ago, and I've never been so busy in my life." I now understand more than ever what they are talking about. Even though I have no plans to retire soon, I could fill every day of the week right now with commitments already on my calendar that have little to do with my professional career.

The beauty of life is that it offers to become deeper and more fulfilling with each passing year. No wonder that time seems to go by faster and faster as we age. There are so many things to do. So many things to enjoy. Which simply means that the challenge of keeping life and calendars in balance will pursue us to the very end.

Compounding the challenge is that with age, each birthday is a striking reminder that we have a finite amount of time left to accomplish all that we want to get done in life. Compression of the time left makes commitments which are truly dear to us become even more urgent.

At the same time, life is taking its toll and leaving us with less energy to put in those exhausting schedules of our youth. Little by little we come to grips with the fact that certain things we've dreamed of for years may never happen. There's not enough time left for them. For me, at least, this has recently meant grieving the loss of some long-cherished dreams.

My wife and I have faced just such a reality this week. From the earliest days of our marriage, we've anticipated taking an extensive vacation someday in the Holy Lands. Twice before, we were scheduled to go and shortly before our scheduled departure, war broke out in the Middle East, forcing us to postpone our plans. Since early this year, we've been planning that trip for the third time, with firm reservations for April and May next year. Then the war with Hamas broke out.

With my intelligence background, much of it centered on issues in the eastern Mediterranean, I realized 24 hours into the conflict that our trip was in jeopardy. Consequently, we were not altogether surprised three days ago when the tour company canceled the trip which we had planned. But while we were not surprised by the cancellation, we were a bit surprised by our emotional reaction. At our age, we have to face the real possibility that we will never make the trip. This time, the cancellation is not a postponement. It's likely the end of a dream.

When I started planning this podcast episode, I had no intention of sharing this personal anecdote. But it seems a perfect example of what I planned to say about the challenge of having time for cherished commitments. Balancing the "must do" list and the "good to do" list never gets easier so long as we retain reasonable health to give us lots of daily options. Thus, the earlier in life that we learn to keep the number of major commitments on our "macro-schedule" in check, the better we equip ourselves for leaving time in our schedule for disruptions without them completely derailing our day or with larger disruptions, our life.

Over my lifetime, I've had to relearn one major lesson time and again: Don't ignore Murphy. Take him seriously. Things will go wrong. And they are likely to go wrong at the most inopportune moments. Plan to be disrupted. Allow for it as you plan. Disruption is as much a part of life as eating and sleeping.

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