



## TIME MANAGEMENT SKILLS AND EFFICIENT PLANNING

By Francesco Pesce, Stefano Dominelli and Francesca Maoli

It is a common understanding that acquiring time management skills shows its best results when applied in real-life contexts. In this, a reflection shall be done on the typical contexts in which individuals may need to apply those skills: of course, this can assume vary forms according to one's professional and personal environment. On the other hand, it is equally true that an important part of human dynamics implicates a relation with other people. Interpersonal relationships and organizations often shape the way in which individuals make decisions, work and operate. For this reason, soft skills are to be learnt in practice without disregarding their social and interpersonal application.

Time management skills – as a fundamental skill in order to improve professional performances – are beneficial to organizations as they can be deployed in a collective context. Moreover, every time management technique to be applied in a professional context shall take into account that individual workers are often part of a group. Thus, the group is at the same time a necessary component, as well as a pedagogical opportunity to better lean time management techniques.

The following exercises are designed to be done by groups in order to *i)* engage in collective learning of time management techniques; *ii)* understand the dynamics of collective environments that affect time management in an organization; *iii)* improve time management skills of a collective reality as a whole.

### **1. Identify the characteristics of a group: strengths and weaknesses**

Each group, be it a company, an association of professionals, or a team of any kind, has its own characteristics. Identifying those characteristics enables the group to understand what to improve and what to valorize. This is also true for time management and efficient planning.

A group is different from a mere gathering of people. In a group, two or more people are connected by common characteristics or goals. In organizations, the objective that runs the overall actions of the team should be the focal point from which develop a good division of tasks and a good operative strategy.

For this reason, it is very important for (small or larger) organizations to have clear, defined, short-term and long-term goals in order to understand the resources that are needed to realize them in the amount of time at disposal.

At the same time, it is very important to understand the characteristics of the human resources at disposal of the group. A working team is usually composed by people having different skills, strengths, weaknesses, and abilities. This should be relevant in assigning tasks and duties. Knowing your team is the first step to determine the best use of time and achieve an overall effective organization. Moreover, a correct distribution of responsibilities is one of the best way to ensure that the group does not waste energy.

# EXERCISE 1

## A CLEAR IDENTIFICATION OF ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITY AS A WAY TO CORRECTLY BALANCE THE ENERGIES AND STRENGTHS OF A GROUP

- a) Create small groups of 5-6 people.
- b) Assign each group one of the following scenarios (the same scenario can be assigned to more than one group if necessary):

### Scenario 1

*You are a study group. You have to perform a scientific experiment that involves to plant five little jars of basil and to take care of the plants until the gems come off the ground. This means providing the necessary materials and to take care of the experiment in all the phases. Meanwhile, it will also be necessary to conduct a scientific study on the ways to plant, grow and harvest basil and on the properties of the plant for health and nutrition purpose. The results of the research will need to be written in a report of 20 pages.*

### Scenario 2

*You are employed in a Bank as a team of the HR office. You are presented with 20 curriculums of candidates for a new position in the Bank. You have 2 weeks to make a first selection of CVs, to conduct all interviews and to choose the ideal candidate.*

### Scenario 3

*You are a team and you have to organize a half-day conference on "Time management and efficient planning" in two months. This requires choosing the topics of the presentations (how many presentations?), invite speakers, set the location, set the travel and accommodation arrangements for each speakers, advertise the event and organize the subscriptions for participants. A person in charge of taking care of speakers during their stay in town will also be necessary.*

### Scenario 4

*You are a team and you have to help a family of six people in need. You need to raise some money through charity in order to buy food, clothes, medicines, etc. Someone has to take care of the budget and has to decide what to buy and when. You also need to establish who will run the direct contact with the family (go visit, talk with them, bring them necessary items).*

- c) Ask each group to read the assignment.
- d) Ask each member of the group to list on a piece of paper all the personal characteristics and abilities that they think would be useful for the group in performing the assignment.
- e) Ask the group to work together on a list of tasks that will need to be done in order to correctly perform the assignment.
- f) Ask the group to distribute the tasks among them, discussing about the abilities/strengths that each of them has offered to contribute in the assignment.
- g) Discuss with each group whether they were able to valorize the capacity of each member of the team. Discuss the positive outcomes that may derive from a correct allocation of tasks.

The exercise should highlight the importance to valorize the capacity of each member of the team in order to better perform a task or reach a particular goal. When each member is able to offer what he/she can do better, the overall energy of the group will be spent more efficiently.

## **2. Planning and delegating: building synergy and collaboration in a group as a way to improve time management and efficient planning**

The following exercise is very useful for groups in order to learn the importance of a good planning and of delegating, in order to achieve a task in the shortest amount of time.

# **EXERCISE 2**

## **ARRANGE THE CARDS**

- a) For this exercise, the trainer would need a deck of cards for each group of participants.
- b) Create small groups of 5-6 participants.
- c) Give each group a deck of playing cards and ask them to shuffle the cards.
- d) Show to all the groups a composition of six cards arranged in a specific order. You can show a picture on a screen (that you have previously prepared), or you can have a deck of cards at disposal for this purpose.
- e) Ask each group to search the same cards from their deck and to arrange the cards in the same specific order that you have shown. The team that completes the task in the shortest amount of time wins.
- f) Do more than one round. In this way the groups shall be able to refine their strategy and to try different ones, if needed.
- g) At the end of the rounds, ask groups to discuss the adopted strategies. Planning and delegating should come out, from the discussion, as key elements to manage time successfully.

## **3. How to overcome time-wasters**

Time wasters are one of the most common reasons for not achieving goals in a set amount of time. They can occur anytime during the day, interrupting us from our main activity. There are many strategies to avoid time-wasters: working in groups on this will enable participants to learn a high number of ways to cope with time wasters in a short amount of time.

# **EXERCISE 3**

## **FIGHTING TIME-WASTERS**

- a) Ask participants to divide in small groups of 5-6 people. Make sure that each group has a set of blank cards or papers and a pen.
- b) You need to have as many envelopes as there are groups.
- c) Write a time-waster on the back of every envelope: *e.g.* Facebook/Instagram; unexpected visitor; excessive meetings; e-mail overload; inability to say “no”; perfectionism; multi-tasking; lack of motivation.
- d) Give each group an envelope. Give each group 4 minutes to write on a blank card/paper all the possible ways to overcome the time-waster that is written on the envelope.
- e) After the 4 minutes are up, ask each group to put the compiled card/paper on the envelope and to pass their envelope to the next group. In this way, each group shall have a different envelope at every round.

- f) Do multiple rounds (if possible, each group shall have the possibility to work on each time-waster).
- g) At the end of all rounds, start the discussion. Each time-waster can be examined together with the multiple ways participant found to overcome it. Participants could also discuss about the best strategies to fight each time-wasters.

#### 4. The Parkinson's law

*The work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.*

This is the famous Parkinson's Law, coined by Cyril Northcote Parkinson in 1955, that explains the importance of deadlines and to give a pre-selected amount of time of each activity we need/want to accomplish. If we set one hour to write a paper, it will probably take us one hour to do the job. However, if you set four hours, the very same task will probably take you four hours to be completed. Procrastination is a key component in understanding Parkinson's Law: looming deadlines makes us hesitant to start a task, especially if it is adverse or undesirable or unpleasant for us. As a consequence, if we set a certain period of time to perform that task, it likely that we will use all the time available.

## EXERCISE 4

### PARKINSON'S LAW

- a) Ask participants to divide in groups.
- b) Give the groups a task to do. It can be a simple task, like organize a deck of cards in a specific way, or to arrange furniture, or to color some papers.
- c) Give some of the teams a specific time limit (*e.g.* 10 minutes). Give to other teams a shorter time limit (*e.g.* 5 minutes). Leave other teams without a time limit.  
However, tell all the teams to finish their task as soon as they can.
- d) Chances are that the teams with the shortest time limit will be finished first, followed by the teams with the longer time limit. Those who had open-ended time frames will take the longest.
- e) Explain that this is due to Parkinson's Law, which states that work will expand to fill the allotted amount of time. When you have no other choice, you will complete the work within the time-frame you have at disposal.
- f) Discuss about practical ways to incorporate the Parkinson's Law into real life.

#### 5. Setting priorities

Our perception of an efficient use of time may be undermined by the fact that we perform non-important tasks and we postpone important ones. In establishing goals, it is very important to identify the executive activities that are necessary to achieve them and to set them in a hierarchical order on the basis of priority. We should rely to our priority hierarchy while deciding: a) in which tasks to engage first; b) the amount of time to dedicate to each task.

The development of an effective planning finds its basis in the ability to set into actions our pre-determined desires and goals. Once we have established our direction, and we have identified our long-term and short-term goals, we need to translate them into a well-defined set of actions.

The following exercise will enable each participant to gain a different perspective on their way to set a specific plan for their pre-determined goals.

## EXERCISE 5

### GOALS INTO ACTIONS AND IDENTIFICATION OF PRIORITIES

- a) For this exercise, it is better to divide the class in small groups of no more than 4 people.
- b) Each group will work in autonomy. In turn, one person of the group will write on a piece of paper a personal goal for the future. The goal can relate to work, study or any other area of life.
- c) Ask the same person to show the piece of paper containing the goal to the other members of the group.
- d) The same person will write, on another piece of paper, a list of a list of actions which are necessary in order to reach that goal. Activities should be as specific as possible.
- e) At the same time, the other members of the group will do the same: each of them will write down the actions that *he* or *she* considers necessary to reach that goal.
- f) After a couple of minutes, ask each group to discuss together their lists of activities. The person that has chosen the goal will notice if there are differences between his/her list and the other member's list.
- g) After the first round, other rounds can be performed in which other members of each group will share a personal goal and different ways of implementation can be discussed.

### 6. Delegation

When working in groups, it is important to understand how to delegate tasks effectively. When groups (and group leaders) are able to delegate tasks, there would likely be an increase in efficiency – as a consequence of a correct distribution of energies – and the group would learn to collaborate and communicate better. Delegating empowers a team, builds trust, and assists with professional development. Moreover, delegating brings in different points of view on how to approach things. Successful delegation requires a correct identification of tasks to delegate, a clear communication and a correct forecasting of expected results.

## EXERCISE 6

### DELEGATION SKILLS PRACTICE

- a) Divide the class in small groups of no more than 3 people.
- b) In each group there will be one Delegator, one Employee and one Observer.
- c) The Delegator will draw from a deck of cards (see below) a task to be delegated and will be asked to delegate the task to the Employee.
- d) The Observer will be asked to pay close attention to how effectively the Delegator communicates with the Employee. He/She will be provided with an Observer Sheet containing the following questions:
  - Did the Delegator explained the importance and the content of the task in a clear and comprehensive way?
  - Did the Delegator presented the expected results?

- Did the Delegator set a deadline?
  - Was the Employee encouraged to perform the task?
  - Other observations.
- e) Ask each group to engage in a discussion, on the basis of the notes taken by the Observer in the Observer Sheet.
- f) The teams will then rotate, with each person getting the chance to Delegate, be an Employee, and also be an Observer.

Deck of tasks:

Ask your Employee to be in charge of the weekly calendar of your organizations, keeping track of all relevant deadlines and appointments.	Ask your Employee to write a report on the activities performed by your team in the last year.	Ask your Employee to be in charge of customer service, answering customer calls for help or complaint.
Ask your Employee to be in charge of the monthly newsletter of your organization.	Ask your Employee to organize a fundraising event for your no-profit organization.	Ask your Employee to design the new logo of your organization.
Ask your Employee to take the lead of a team that will organize a conference the next month.	The archive of your organization needs to be digitalized for a better use and finding of data. Ask your Employee to transform old paper files in IT folders.	Ask your Employee to proofread a document and to edit according to the editorial rules of your organization.
Ask your Employee to prepare a captivating presentation on a new product that your company is about to launch on the market.	You have a meeting tomorrow, which is very important for your company's future. Unfortunately, you are sick. Ask your Employee to take your place at the meeting.	Ask your Employee to conduct interviews for a new member of the team to include in your organization.
Ask your Employee to think about new advertising strategies to promote the activities of your organization.	Ask your Employee to be in charge of the organization of social activities for the members of your company.	Ask your Employee to take care of the warehouse stationery of your company.