

Time Management and the Pastor

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Introduction

One of the most critical responsibilities of a good basketball coach is the appropriate usage of their timeouts. When it appears that the opposing team is gaining momentum and overwhelming his team, a good coach will call a timeout to allow his team to catch their breath, regain their composure, and develop a new plan for victory. From time to time throughout my ministry I have been blessed by an appropriately called timeout. God has afforded me times and opportunities to take a short break from the daily and weekly grind of ministry in order to catch my breath, regain my composure, and develop a fresh plan to overtake new obstacles. While this paper has been in process for far too long, it is primarily the product of a ministerial timeout to reflect and study how I could gain better control of my schedule and my calendar. I pray that it will be a blessing to others.

The Symptoms of Poor Time Management

Time is the most valuable non-replenishing resource that God has given to us. As pastors there is nothing more valuable than our time. Time is a resource that God has entrusted to us as stewards. A good steward will manage his time wisely. Paul in Ephesians 5:15-16 encourages us to “be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil.”¹ In Psalm 90 Moses instructs us to “number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom.” Both Paul and Moses indicate that the appropriate use of our time is a reflection of wisdom. We could also then surmise that an

¹ All scripture quotations are taken from *The New American Standard Bible*, La Habra: Foundation Publications, Inc., 1995.

inappropriate or neglectful use of our time would be a reflection of foolishness. But how then do we avoid such foolishness?

First, good time management principles are seldom modeled and rarely taught in college or seminary. For this reason, proper time management skills are often hard to learn. Second, we often associate poor time management with laziness and inefficiency. While these are certainly examples of poor time management, the greater culprit within ministerial circles is often busy-ness. We tend to honor a full schedule and a full calendar. Running from meeting to meeting and hospital to hospital while making phone calls and answering emails can often times be viewed as a badge of honor. In this scenario it is very easy to fall into the activity trap that involves more work without being effective.⁷ So how can we identify when we have crossed the line between good productivity and poor time management? Every disease has symptoms and poor time management is no different. Here are some that are easily identifiable.

Missed Meetings and Poor Punctuality

There are few things worse than receiving a call or email from someone with whom you had an appointment and you didn't show up. Repeatedly showing up late to meetings is equally egregious. Both of these are clear symptoms of a lack of poor management and even worse a demonstration of a lack of value for both your time and also the person with whom you are meeting. As pastors there are few things as important as the relationships we build with the people to whom God has given us and a lack of punctuality will certainly strain or even worse destroy those relationships. The reality is that when our lives become a constant running from one demand to the next we become forgetful.³

² Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 98.

³ Lisa TerKeurst, *The Best Yes: Making Wise Decisions in the Midst of Endless Demands* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2014), 9.

Indecisiveness

When the pastor is overcome by a multitude of tasks the danger is indecisiveness. The overwhelming nature of too many choices and too many tasks can lead to paralysis by analysis.⁴ The need for clarity and focus makes for easier choices.

Saying “Yes” to Everything

Most requests that reach the pastor are good requests. Pastors are in the people business and people matter. However, when a pastor says “yes” to every request he will often neglect the most important matters for the sake of urgent matters.⁵ This can be very difficult to navigate especially since most pastors tend to be people pleasers. The danger of saying “yes” to everything is that the most important matters will be overcome by the urgent matters which leads to a very exhausted and ineffective leader.⁶

Frustration

Too many meetings along with a lack of clarity and focus can lead to frustration. Frustration and impatience is a sure sign of poor time management. When a pastor has failed to allow sufficient time for a task or procrastinated it will often lead to a short temper with co-workers or even family.

Lack of Excellence

Often times a pastor can get away with poor time management for a while but eventually it catches up with him. Poor time management creates a lack of margin time. Margin time is what allows the pastor to still excel even when the surprises of ministry arise. Margin time also allows the pastor time to improve the ministry and not simply maintain

⁴ Charles Duhigg, *Smarter Faster Better: The Secrets of Being Productive in Life and Business* (New York: Random House, 2016), 303.

⁵ TerKeurst, 20.

⁶ Will Mancini, *Church Unique: How Missional Leaders Cast Vision, Capture Culture, and Create Movement* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 89.

the ministry.⁷ This is critical. With a lack of margin time the effectiveness and excellence of the ministry will falter.

Each of these symptoms could also be identified as the result of a bad habit. Charles Duhigg in his book *The Power of Habit* identifies the three components of a habit; the cue, the routine, and the reward.⁸ When a person feels overwhelmed by too many tasks this can become a cue that leads to a time wasting routine that we often call procrastination that leads to a temporary reward of distraction.

The Process for Improvement

Having defined the symptoms and determined the diagnosis of poor time management the pastor must move forward with a process for improvement. The goal of this process is to assess your current time stewardship status and develop a structure that will allow for a more effective use of time. A common fallacy is that if a person will simply work harder with greater discipline, then better time management will be produced. While hard work and discipline are critical to better time management, they must be combined with a structure that will provide guardrails to keep him out of time management ditches. The structure will also provide a means of accountability, a measurement for success, and a clearer picture of priorities.

Define your current time usage.

In order for a pastor to improve his time management he must first have a proper evaluation of his current time usage. How much time is being spent on activities that aren't high priority? How much time is being spent on activities that prevent him from focusing on what he uniquely offers the church? Often times a pastor will feel that he has very little wasted time but upon further evaluation is surprised by how much time is misused or wasted. One of the frequent complaints of pastors is that they don't have enough time. The reality is that every person has the same amount of time and will find the time for that which is most

⁷ Andy Stanley, Reggie Joiner, and Lane Jones, *Seven Practices of Effective Ministry* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2004), 148.

⁸ Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit* (New York: Random House, 2012), 42.

important to him. How can he fully know where his time is being spent? One of the most useful ways is a time log.

Time Log

A time log (also known as an activity log) is a written record of how a person spends his or her time. The time log helps a person to have a more accurate picture of where they are investing their time and wasting their time.

The process for keeping a time log is pretty simple. A person can use any number of recording mechanisms. This could be as simple as keeping a small notebook and pen or recording their activities in their phone. The ability to make a record of the activity as quickly as possible after the activity is critical.

The written record of the activity should include the date and time along with an accurate activity description. It is also important to make a brief description of how you feel following the activity. Finally, the duration of the activity should be recorded along with an assigned value (high, medium, low, none). It is important that throughout the process of a time log evaluation that you don't change your normal behavior or work schedule. The person then records everything they do throughout the day.

What I found to be personally helpful was a brief summary description of how I felt both at the end of the day and at the end of the week. The time log should be kept for at least two weeks in order to get an accurate picture of your current time usage. This can be a somewhat cumbersome process. It is important to remind yourself that this is a temporary system that is moving you towards a more effective schedule and become a more effective time manager.

Evaluating the Time Log

It has been said, "If you show me your bank account summary statement, I will tell you what you value." Jesus said it this way, "Where your treasure is there your heart will be also." In other words, where you spend your money is a picture of what you value. In a similar way, where you spend your time will give you a clearer picture of what is most important to you. In the end one will often find that what they think

they value and where they actually spend their time are very distinct. When what we value and where we actually spend our time separate we encounter frustration. To the extent that your time log equals your values is probably the extent to which you experience fulfillment and the distance between your time log and your actuals values will be equal to your frustration.

As you begin to analyze your time log it is helpful to group some activities together. For instance, group all the time spent in meetings together. You may want to have sub-categories for meetings. Pastoral counseling might be one form of meeting. Meeting with prospective members is another category. Here is a list of some of the categories that I came up with during the analysis of my time log:

- Family Time – (43%)
- Church Time – (57%)
- Meetings (29%)
- Staff Meetings
- Meetings with Prospective Members
- Pastoral Counseling.
- Hospital Visits – (5%)
- Sermon Preparation/Personal Prayer & Devotional Time - (30%)
- Email (8%)
- Appreciation Notes (1%)
- Vision – Organizational Health – (5%)
- Participating in Church Services – (15%)
- Misc. Margin Time – (7%)

These were the broad categories that I defined as I began to analyze my time log. In general, my days began around 5:30 a.m. and ended around 10 p.m. This equaled to an average of 7.5 hours of sleep per day and an average of 16.5 waking hours of productive time per day and 115.5 waking hours of productive time each week. On average I spent 65 hours per week at work which equaled out to be about 57% of my week. After interviewing pastors of churches with similar sized congregations, I found this number to be a bit high. On average I spent 18 hours per week (29%) in meetings with the vast majority (almost 90%) of my meetings spent with staff. I spent relatively no time at the hospital visiting members and very little time connecting with guest and first-time

visitors at the church. My margin time was on average around 5.5 hours per week. My final analysis based on my time log was that I was efficient with my week. I found that I had very little wasted time. I also found, however, that much of my week was spent on things that I did not value highly. As Will Mancini states in his book *Church Unique*, “Not all activity is progress.”⁹ This doesn’t mean that all my activities were necessarily bad activities, they just were not the best activities for me and the church. Meaning, they were not the best use of my time. My values and were I was actually spending my time didn’t match up and I was experiencing a lot of frustration. This leads us to the next step.

Determine Your Priorities

What you value should occupy the majority of your time in order for you to be effective in your home and within your church. If you want to be effective at growing a healthy marriage, a healthy family, and leading a healthy organization you must schedule your life around your values.

How does a person go about determining their values? Let me first state the obvious. Every value and priority needs to be backed by Scripture. The Word of God must be the foundation of all our priorities and values. Moving from that foundation, a good question to ask yourself is, “What can I uniquely do that no one else can?”

Personal Priorities

When it comes to the family this question becomes very simple. No one else can be a husband to my wife and no one else can be a father to my boys. Therefore, being a husband and being a father is a high priority in my life. It is not enough, however, to state the value. We can talk all day long about how I love my wife and boys but if there is no scheduled time for my family then I would call that an empty value. Remember, the schedule and the time indicates the value. A person may say, “I value that relationship or this activity, but I just don’t have time.” I respectfully believe this is an excuse. During my time log experiment I was blown away by the wasted time of checking out *espn.com*, my weather app, and browsing twitter. We will find time for what is valuable to us. The most

⁹ Mancini, 177.

effective leaders I know have the fullest schedules. Yet they still find time for those things that they value.

As husbands and fathers we must do our best to schedule time for family. Scheduling a weekly lunch with my wife and scheduling a free afternoon for time with my family has become a high priority in my life. I have found that I now schedule almost every area of my vocational life. Why would I not treat my family with this same value? Placing my family on my schedule guards against over-scheduling and speaks value to my wife and kids. My wife and I make sure to schedule vacations with the boys and weekends to ourselves. I have found that if I don't schedule these time they will be overrun by lesser important tasks. Scheduling time with my family has become an important personal priority that has helped me to lead a healthy and strong family.

Personal time alone in God's Word is also a priority because no one else can do this for me. I cannot delegate my personal spiritual health. For this reason, my personal devotional time gets the very first portion of my day. My personal health is a high priority to me.

Organizational Priorities

Within the church or organizational environment this question becomes a bit more difficult. This is often difficult for a pastor since talking about what only you can do within the church seems arrogant or prideful. Pastors must move beyond this. The reality is that if God has called you to be the pastor then He has uniquely gifted you to lead that congregation. When determining what only you can do for your church it is often helpful to consider the pastoral responsibilities into three important categories.

1. Lead

Lead would refer to the administrative leadership of the church. Depending on the size of the church and the staff structure this responsibility may fall heavily on an executive pastor or someone in a similar role. Even in the case of an executive pastor or an associate pastor the responsibility of leading the church and the staff to some extent falls heavily upon the lead pastor. This would include leading staff meetings,

determining direction/vision, and guarding organizational and staff culture.

Direct reports are a significant part of the lead category. Within the smaller church context all employees will report to the Senior Pastor. Within the mega-church the amount of direct reports must be limited. The appropriate amount of direct reports is a bit subjective but should probably be no more than seven.

2. Feed

Feed is the proclamation, preaching, and teaching aspect of the lead pastor role. This would include sermon preparation and study. For the mega-church pastor this role becomes increasingly difficult to guard. Many pastors will spend large portions of their days at home or at an offsite location in order to guard this time from interruption. It is one of the most influential aspects of the pastoral role. While others can occasionally fill the pulpit, this is often one of the responsibilities that only the pastor can provide for the church. For this reason, this responsibility is normally given more attention and time than the other two areas.

3. Care

Care refers to overall care of the members. This would include hospital visits, counseling, funerals, weddings, and guest follow-up. Within many mega-churches the pastor will become less involved with this portion of pastoral care. As the church grows the ability to stay connected with the overall church body becomes more difficult. Church members within mega-church will often have less of an expectation for pastoral care from their lead pastor. This does not make this responsibility any less critical. The pastor's ability to minister to families during critical times is the primary means of building and developing spiritual equity. Spiritual equity is critical when making changes and adjustments in the church body.

Every pastor will place different levels of importance upon each of these categories. Again, the question that must be asked is "What is it that only I can do?" This question does not mean that you are personally indispensable. No one is indispensable. This question does imply,

however, that you are the only person that God has placed as pastor of the church. Therefore, given your current responsibilities, resources, and opportunities, what is it that only you can do?

For some pastors this will involve more of the feed role. This would mean that the majority of their time each week should be spent upon sermon preparation and personal study. For example, if this is my number one organizational priority then I may want to start with the understanding that I will spend at least 24 hours per week in this area. It may also mean that before I move on to any other responsibility I will make sure that I have completed this responsibility. This activity is a non-negotiable and a top priority. Steven Covey would refer to this as beginning with the end in mind. I have a clear picture of what I desire to accomplish and everything else is evaluated through that lens.¹⁰ For other pastors the lead category will be of higher significance and will consume a greater portion of the pastor's resources and time. Whatever the case may be at some point the pastor must decide what matters most to him and schedule their time and their week around that priority. Good time management does not mean that the pastor does more, it simply means that he does more of what matters most. It is a ministry and a life that characterized by an uncompromising focus on a few things that make the greatest impact.¹¹

As was referred to earlier, frustration is a result of spending too much time and resources on those activities that don't matter to you. In order for the pastor to be a successful leader and develop a health and growing church he must learn to determine and schedule his values both in his personal life and his organizational life. He must give the very best of his time, energy, and resources to what is best and what matters most.

Develop a Structure

Some form of structure is vitally important to achieving success in the area of time management. The best time managers have systems of structure all around them that help them to say "no" to the numerous

¹⁰ Covey, 99.

¹¹ Stanley, 86.

amount of smaller distractions so that they can say “yes” to the bigger issues of greater importance.¹²

Structure for Staff

Administrative help is the pastor’s first line of defense for improved time management. When the pastor’s administrative support clearly understands his values she can guard against unnecessary meetings and interruptions. As a pastor who moved from a smaller church to a mega-church it was extremely difficult to transition from scheduling all my own appointments to having people work through my administrator. I felt as though pushing people to go through my secretary would come across as being arrogant. I found, however, that most people are very understanding and that working through my admin ensures that I don’t overload my schedule and that I don’t forget to assign meetings.

An administrator can help with meeting preparation and analysis. My administrative assistant currently takes notes in every meeting I attend and sends me a copy and files a copy for my review later. This allows me stay engaged in the meeting without having to take notes and keeps me better prepared for future meetings as I can easily review past meetings. This support alone has cut my time preparing for meetings in half and helped me to feel better prepared for my meetings.

The role of an executive pastor is viewed by some pastors to be extremely critical to their effectiveness and time management. A good executive pastor can handle much of the administrative work and handle a majority of the meetings. Every executive pastor has his or her strengths and the best pastor/executive pastor relationships appear to be those where the executive pastor is geared more towards administration or lead category and the senior pastor is geared more towards the preaching or feed category. For this relationship to work both pastors must be both humble and secure. The danger of this relationship is that the executive pastor becomes the filter for all information. Receiving information regarding the church’s overall health and unity can be dangerous. The executive pastor can also create too much of a gap or separation between the senior pastor and the rest of the staff. I have not had an executive pastor but can see both the positives

¹² Covey, 157.

and the negatives as it relates to time management. At the end of the day it appears that the critical issue is not so much the role as it is the person who fills the role. If the executive pastor and the senior pastor have a great relationship that complements each other then there is no doubt that this role can be a huge benefit.

The important issue is that the pastor has a means of healthy delegation among his staff. This may come in the form of five to seven staff reports who each handle an area of the church to which the pastor can direct delegation. For example, the pastor may have an associate pastor of pastoral care who organizes, oversees, and handles all the hospital visits. He may also have an associate pastor of operations who is empowered to handle the day to day business and operations of the church. Much of the counseling can be handed off to a trained and professional staff counselor. A good leader and an effective time manager will delegate as much authority as possible and empower other leaders to make decisions.¹³ At the end of the day the pastor must structure his staff in such a way that they can effectively handle the responsibilities and activities that do not fall within his core values and priorities.

Structure for Meetings

There are few things more painful than a bad meeting. There are two critical factors to a bad or painful meeting. First, a painful meeting is a boring meeting. Meetings that involve painful reports and unengaging lectures from uninspired staff when other critical activities are waiting can be incredibly painful. Second, a painful meeting is an ineffective meeting. Talking in circles around issues and problems that do not contribute to the greater effectiveness of the church is painful and a poor stewardship of everyone's time including the pastor. The good news is that if the pastor dislikes the meetings or if they are painful, he has the ability and the authority to change them.

Good meetings that contribute to good time management often involve conflict. To create a more engaged meeting structure that reveals the information most quickly the pastor must mine for conflict that

¹³ David Marquet, *Turn the Ship Around!* (New York: Penguin Group, 2012), 74.

uncovers “relevant, constructive ideological conflict.”¹⁴ Far too often pastors do their best to avoid conflict and tension in meetings.¹⁵ The pastor, however, must work to create an environment of trust where healthy conflict leads to more information and better decisions.¹⁶ Healthy conflict will keep all members of the staff engaged and prevent redundant conversations that don’t produce results or decisions.

A good meeting structure also involves more meetings that have distinct purposes. At first this may seem counterproductive to good time management. Most pastors would probably argue that good time management would involve fewer meetings. The reasoning behind this thought is based on our current meeting structure where too much time is wasted and very little gets accomplished. The solution to this problem is not to eliminate meetings but to make your meetings better. As Peter Lencioni states, “When meetings are properly utilized they actually become time savers.”¹⁷ Poorly executed meetings result in the need for further clarification with staff at other times when the clarification should have come during the assigned meeting. By eliminating the need to revisit items we remove repetition and unnecessary phone conversations, emails, and voicemails. This is what Lencioni calls “sneaker time.”¹⁸

For our staff I have modified our staff structure to include three distinct meetings. We have two weekly staff meetings. One involves only the executive staff and the other involves all staff in the building. In the executive staff meeting we seek to make decisions as they pertain to the weekly service items. In the all-staff meeting we seek to clarify and communicate all the weekly activities and promotions. Both of these meetings last no more than an hour.

Each month the executive staff takes a day for an off-site meeting. During this meeting we address larger issues that often arise out of the weekly staff meetings. This meeting usually lasts an entire day and we try address no more than four critical issues. Finally, twice a year we seek to

¹⁴ Patrick Lencioni, *Death by Meeting* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 149.

¹⁵ Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of Team* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 128.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁷ Lencioni, *Death by Meeting*, 167.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

take a two-day offsite retreat to address future plans and analyze the state of our current ministries.

By reducing my amount of direct staff reports and moving to a more organized staff meeting structure I have significantly reduced the amount of times in meetings. I have also reduced “sneaker time” and become more efficient, effective, and productive. The staff seem to enjoy the meetings we have and stay more engaged and unified while engaging in healthy conflict that produces results.

Structure for Personal Productivity

Every highly effective pastor or leader needs a personal system for productivity. Stephen Covey offers a four quadrant system for personal productivity that has been widely used by effective leaders.¹⁹ This model helps the pastor sift through the urgent and important tasks and those that are not urgent and unimportant. For many the structure might be as simple as writing down a to-do list on a 5 x 8 note card and prioritizing the list each morning. The amount of available apps for productivity is almost overwhelming. Apps such as Wonderlist and Todist are extremely popular. The best system and structure for you is the one that you will use. It is not so important which one you choose but that you are consistent in using a system to stay on task and accomplish your daily goals. There is nothing more discouraging that to complete a day with a lot of activity and feel like you got nothing accomplished. On the other hand, there is nothing more rewarding than completing a day, no matter how exhausted you feel, and knowing that you have completed tasks and moved closer to your goals. I know of no other way to experience the latter without some form of personal structure for productivity.

The pastor must also develop a structure for his personal and work calendar. The ability for both my wife and my admin to view and modify my calendar has proven to be especially helpful. They are both able to monitor my schedule and they have both helped me to avoid the awkwardness of overscheduling or missing a meeting. Fewer and fewer people are using manual day planners as technology has advanced to the point of being able to quickly add tasks and schedule appointments on our phones. I will often carry small note cards with me on Sunday

¹⁹ Covey, 151.

morning and make notes about meetings or tasks as I move through the day. I will then review the notes move necessary meetings and tasks to the calendar on my computer or phone. I have used this system because I don't like to leave my phone on during Sunday morning services.

Discipline & Habits

We all have the ability to become better time managers. Systems, staff, and administrators can all be a huge aid to honing our time management skills. All these aids are only as good as our discipline to use them.²⁰ Wisdom lies not in the accumulation of knowledge but in the application of that knowledge to our lives. So it is with time management.

Throughout my study and research of highly effective pastors I was amazed both by how much responsibility they carried and the ease with which they carried it. While they were busy they didn't seem tired. While they were highly productive they did not appear overwhelmed. They had disciplined their lives with appropriate boundaries and focused the majority of their time and efforts on those areas where their passion, ability, giftedness, and effectiveness all matched up. They had the personal discipline to say "no" to a lot of good things so that they could say "yes" to the most important. Their schedules were driven by their values rather than the urgent requests of the moment. They were effective because they were disciplined to schedule their values and structure their lives to become the productive leaders and pastors that God could use for His glory.

Conclusion

Again, this research and an appropriate and divine ordained "time-out" have allowed me the opportunity to become a better pastor and leader by becoming a more effective time manager. I have a clearer picture of my current time usage and identified areas that need improvement. I have learned to schedule and prioritize my values. I have created a staff structure that allows me to delegate the tasks that others can do and focus my time on that which only I can do. I have developed a better meeting structure that has allowed our church and staff to

²⁰Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of Team*, 138.

become more productive and spend less time in meetings. I have learned the keys to eliminating bad habits and developing the habits that lead to better time management.²¹ I have become more disciplined with my time and schedule. Finally, by becoming a better time manager I am growing a healthy marriage, family, staff, and become a better leader of my church.

²¹ Duhigg, *The Power of Habit*, 387.