

The Best Question Ever about Time Management

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“In light of your past experiences, your current circumstances and responsibilities, and your future hopes and dreams, what is the wisest way to invest your time right now?”

Leaders who ask me for suggestions on how to improve “time management” usually want to cram even more activities into their busy schedules. Most are not thinking about improving the quality of their time, though that may be an even better enhancement.

I recently reread Andy Stanley’s 2004 book *The Best Question Ever*. In its simplest form, it’s “What is the wise thing to do?” Because Andy has counseled many individuals whose regrets lie in the areas of relationship management, money management, and time management, he devotes special chapters to each of these.

This column shares with you Andy’s observations in the area of time management.

Have you ever looked back on a week, a month, or even several years and asked, “Where did all that time go?” Andy gives the obvious answer: “Away. It went away. And there is no way to recover a minute of it.” Andy then identifies five related statements that represent principles of accumulated value.

Do yourself a favor and make these few minutes of reading an opportunity for reflection. Think about four dimensions of your life: professional, physical, relational, and spiritual. As you read, consider what you wish you had done routinely over the past twelve months. As you look to the future, what could you start doing consistently that would have a positive effect on you and the lives of those around you?

There is a cumulative value to investing small amounts of time in certain activities over a long period. Andy says, you “can’t go back and relive, relove, rearrange, reprioritize, redirect, or refocus.” You can, however, start today to recommit to activities such as exercise, or deeper communication with your spouse, or routinely seeking feedback from your colleagues. These behaviors may not yield much benefit from one day of attention, but over many months, the return on the investment is large.

There are rarely any immediate consequences for neglecting single installments of time in any arena of life. Disregard your health, or your spouse, or your employees or customers for a day, and you probably won’t hear any complaints. But if you put off that important-but-not-urgent activity one day, the second day is easier, and then the third, and pretty soon....

Neglect has a cumulative effect. Allow any important aspect of your life to go unattended for an extensive period of time, and you have major repair work to do. Sometimes, of course, the effects are irreversible. A burst of energy and special attention may not correct some periods of neglect.

There is no cumulative value to the urgent things that you allow to interfere with the important things. You are constantly bombarded by interruptions and random pursuits. They seem relevant for the moment, so you stop or delay your important activities to attend to them. When the day is done, you wonder, “What do I have to show for my efforts today?” When you add up all the “what did I do instead of” activities, there’s usually not much of substance.

In the critical arenas of life, you cannot make up for lost time. The important areas of your life require small deposits all along the way. If you miss those opportunities, they are lost forever.

You already know all this, right? But how well are you doing it? Could you make an improvement starting today? Will you establish new commitments for yourself and routinely follow through!

I have condensed Andy Stanley’s thoughts extensively to save you some time. I hope you will reflect on your past behaviors. Please contact me in a few months and let me join in celebrating your progress!

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