

Time Use During “Social Distancing”

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“Business as usual?” Nope. COVID-19 has upended everything. And we will live in a very different new normal when this pandemic ends. You can’t control it, so effectively use your available time!

As a leader, you’re either busier than normal guiding direct reports who work from home, or you have time on your hands. If you are handling crises daily, working to keep your operations afloat, some guidance from this article about “importance” may apply to you. Use it as you are able.

If, however, you are at home, temporarily “on hold” because your direct reports are furloughed or otherwise minimally working, this article is directed to you! And it’s based on guidance from Habit 3, “First Things First,” of Stephen Covey’s 1989 book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

If you’re forty or younger, you may not be familiar with this business classic. Here’s an overview of Stephen Covey’s focus on time management. For more detail, find the book and turn to page 150.

Covey asks you to learn to distinguish between urgent and important activities. Important tasks are those you choose to address because they are consistent with your mission, values, and high-priority goals. They usually are consciously chosen from among a variety of opportunities. The rewards often don’t manifest immediately but are experienced in the longer-term. Leaders who focus often on important issues effectively and significantly move the organization toward its vision.

Urgent tasks, on the other hand, clamor for immediate attention. They are usually very much in your awareness, demanding your action NOW. Immediate and satisfying rewards accrue for addressing interruptions and resolving pressing, in-your-face matters. Urgent tasks often **feel** important. That’s the deception of urgency; it **masquerades** as importance!

Important items left unaddressed often become critically urgent. We call those tasks crises. Many individuals and organizations operate from crisis to crisis. Important AND urgent matters often dominate your agenda. You rarely find time to address what you know are high-return opportunities.

How do you get off the crisis-to-crisis treadmill? Covey suggests that ANY time not consumed in addressing crises should be spent on important initiatives, not on deceptive, urgent items. Willful choice and discipline are required to focus your attention on important but not urgent initiatives.

Whether busier than normal or on the edge of boredom, consider important leadership activities that you can accomplish with the unexpected time you’ve been given because of COVID-19.

Enhancing relationships. Make contact at least weekly with your direct reports and their families to nurture and to offer help. Encourage your direct reports to do the same with their teams. If your organization is large, consider connecting with everyone at least once over the coming weeks. (To prepare yourself, read “Leadership from the Viewpoint of Followers” on my website, address below.)

Connect frequently with your suppliers and customers, both internal and external. Send thank you notes, citing actions and perspectives for which you are grateful. Reach out in concern to people who might benefit from your expertise or influence. (To prepare yourself, read “What Services Do Servant Leaders Provide?” on my website, address below.)

Planning and preparation. Think, ponder, imagine. Envision and strategize how your organization could benefit perhaps during but especially after the pandemic wanes. How could you expand products and services? How should you position your organization to fill expected and unexpected needs? Explore and research those many ideas that seem to never receive your attention.

Clarify and articulate your organization's processes. Articulate your personal processes for how you lead. The clearer you are on how you do what you do, the more empowered you are to make improvement, and the easier it is to mentor developing leaders in your organization. (To prepare yourself, read "The Importance of Process Management" on my website, address below).

Nurture yourself physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Encourage others similarly. Rest. Exercise. Express love. Creatively expand family time. Read. Write. Think. Pray. Reflect on the principles of your faith. Find resourceful ways to engage with others outside your immediate family.

Development. Delegate for the growth capacity of others. Think about potential leaders in your organization and begin now to stimulate their growth. Train. Coach. Mentor. Collaborate with team members on their ideas. Learn more deeply about the aspirations of those you influence. (Read "Why Leaders Don't Build Future Leaders," and consider what you could do differently.)

Stephen Covey opens his chapter on time management by asking, "What one thing could you do...that would make a tremendous positive difference in your personal, business, or professional life?" That's a great question any time, but especially while socially distancing during this pandemic.

Often, more than one thing will immediately come to mind. Start a "to do" list of important items that aren't deadline-driven, items that likely receive too little attention from you during more normal times.

Is there a habit you'd like to adopt? Consider using your time now to initiate that effort. Start small and build up your reliability over the coming weeks. We don't know how long this social distancing is going to last, but it will certainly be long enough to move in the direction you desire!

No one expected this abnormal time, yet it's a great opportunity to initiate lasting improvements! You don't know what the new "normal" will be, so use your time to make creative, constructive changes. You'll be a better leader, and your team members will surely appreciate your enhancements!

Dennis offers you over 400 articles on his website at buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives. Or you can contact him at 770-286-2250. Dennis also welcomes your suggestions for future articles.