



The Chartered Management Institute's Short Course Programme in association with ProSeminar

Can time management training deliver?

Philip Moon answers some tough questions from Mary Pearce about ProSeminar's course 'Time Management & Personal Effectiveness'.

Mary

Philip, I know you're one of the most experienced trainers in this area, but I still need to be convinced that time-management training can actually work – isn't being good time manager, and being well-organised, more a matter of personality than skills or systems – you've either got it or you haven't.

Philip

Well, Mary, you'd hardly expect me to buy into that. Yes, personality is important and some people seem to be naturally better organised than others. But it's particularly the people who aren't 'born time managers' (and I'd include myself) who benefit most from training.

Mary

Well I did a time management course a few years ago. We got given a leather-bound personal planner and showed how to use it. It all sounded great at the time, but it just wasn't me. When I got back to work I soon slipped back into my old ways. I never had the time to manage my time!

Philip

I know what you mean. Someone once said that time management's like being on a diet – okay in the short run, but impossible to stick to long-term!

More seriously though, I think personal planning systems have a tremendous

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contribution to make. I've been on a couple of courses run by providers of proprietary time management systems and I got a lot out of them. But not everybody does. And that's the problem with a systems approach to time management training – if the system doesn't work for you you're left with nothing.

Mary

So what's your approach?

Philip

Well first of all as far as systems are concerned, it's important to encourage people to develop a system which suits them – not ask them to fit to a system designed by somebody else. On my courses I present various options, but I want people to use those options as a stimulus to find their own way – and the way that suits them is clearly going to depend on their personality and the nature of their job...

Mary

Do they have to use a personal organiser – surely software like MS Outlook or Lotus Notes is the modern way?

Philip

Well in part this is what I'm saying - it's individual choice. For some it's the leather-bound organiser, for others it's a matter of exploring the contribution the appropriate software can make and yet for others it may be a hardback exercise that works best. But whatever the 'equipment', basic principles remain the same – it's a question of applying them in a way that is practical and realistic.

Mary

What are those principles?

Philip

Oh things like 'Plan your time rather than your tasks and plan it in big bold chunks not it'sy-bitsy minutes here and it'sy-bitsy minutes there'. 'Don't be a pieces of paper manager – integrate everything into one system'. 'Don't rely on your memory'. But I don't want to get too bogged down talking about systems, there's so much more to time-management and that's quite fundamental to my approach.

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Mary

Okay, what?

Philip

Time is a dimension of everything we do at work. Improving time management therefore means reviewing current working practices and deciding on action to 'work smarter'. Indeed a two-day time management course is a great opportunity for individuals to step back from their work and take stock – it can be a kind of personal audit or, if you're doing it with a team of close colleagues, a team audit.

Mary

'Working smarter' – isn't that a bit of a cliché?

Philip

Maybe, but I'm not going to apologise for that. If you're going to improve your time management you've got to look at what you do, what the problems are and think about how you're going to do things differently.

Mary

Okay – here's the bottom line question. You say 'improve' – how much improvement can I hope to get from going on one of your courses?

Philip

Clearly that's an individual matter. Some people may come across principles and techniques that represent a major breakthrough in the way they approach work – the scales fall from their eyes and they have a kind of 'road to Damascus' experience. I have to say that's rare – I can't remember anyone standing up in one of my courses and shouting 'halleluia, now I've got it'. For most people the improvement comes at the margin – not so much doing one thing a thousand percent better, but doing a thousand things one percent better. But this has a significant cumulative effect. You said yourself that you hadn't got time to manage time. It's a vicious circle really – but vicious circles can be turned into virtuous circles. If you can tip the balance in your own favour even if it's by initially taking some relatively small actions, so you can give yourself more control and more time and ability to manage your time.

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Mary

But my problems aren't just my failings – they're to do with other people and with the way the organisation's structured and resourced.

Philip

Of course they are. What I encourage people to do is to look at their scope for action. That's not just about what they control – their own time planning, working habits, personal organisation etc –it's about what they can influence.

You can influence the organisation by making a structured case for the reallocation of resources or for changing a system or a structure. You can influence other people by providing them with feedback about problems they cause you and by setting a good example yourself.

Mary

Ah you mean things like my boss dumping jobs on me at the last moment when she's sat on them for a week! I remember a colleague once saying: 'Don't make your poor planning my problem'!

Philip

Exactly. I want people to be helpful and co-operative and to help their colleagues and bosses out of the holes they dig for themselves, but if you go on indulging other people's poor planning you don't get them to change – so you need to feedback, you need to be assertive.

Mary

Okay – so you're putting a lot of emphasis on action. One of the things I've got to do – and I don't need to go on one of your courses to find this out - is to be tidier. My desk's a mess! How am I going to do it?

Philip

Well I'm pleased your aware your desk needs tidying - some people aren't, or at least, aren't aware of the kind of impact their lack of desk organisation is having on their overall effectiveness. But either way, wanting to be tidy is not enough.

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I'm keen for course participants to distinguish between 'resolutions' and 'action'. A resolution says 'I ought to do something about that' e.g. 'I ought to be tidier' whereas an action is more specific e.g. 'I'm going to set up a new filing system to cater for my projects-in-progress'. And if you can be specific, you can set a deadline date for the action and make it happen.

Mary

So do you get participants to do action plans?

Philip

I encourage them to do so. Hopefully they'll find the course stimulating and come away with a lot of good ideas, but I want to get them to capture those ideas in terms of specific initiatives they can take to work smarter. Of course it's then up to them to monitor their progress and make sure they do the things they say they're going to do.

Mary

Okay Philip. You've talked about systems and you've talked about action, but aren't their skills and principles involved as well?

Philip

They certainly are. There are skills in planning, skills in delegating effectively, skills in running and participating in efficient meetings etc. And there are principles which need to be born constantly in mind...

Mary

Principles like what?

Philip

Well many of them are slogans really - 'Don't let important jobs become urgent', 'Plan with others in mind', 'Plan for things to go wrong', 'Am I spending the right kind of time on the things that are really important' etc.

Mary

Plan for things to go wrong..?!

Philip

Yes, Mary, I think you know I mean 'Plan in case things go wrong', not 'Plan to make them go wrong'! That's quite a theme in fact – reducing vulnerability to the unexpected, the last minute hitch, the extra workload, the equipment breakdown, etc.

Mary

Important and urgent – that's about priorities. What's the difference?

Philip

Urgency is about the deadline and should influence the order in which you do jobs. Importance is about the impact or contribution of a task and should influence the amount of time worth spending on it.

Mary

Who's the course for?

Philip

Anyone who works in an organisation and who's got some discretion over how they manage their time. If the job's almost exclusively reactive – like manning a helpdesk or following strictly laid down procedures – the course probably won't help that much. Where it's really powerful is when people have to manage a range of tasks and projects with a range of different time horizons.

Mary

So it's not just for people starting out on their careers – it's for experienced people and senior people as well?

Philip

Absolutely and it's not just a one-off. Improving time management is a continuous process throughout everyone's career. Even if you went on a course five years ago, you should still benefit from attending ours. So Mary, get your diary out and check out the dates on our Course Directory!

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