

CHAPTER 4

Getting It Done in Time: Mission Impossible?

*One who is slack in his work is a close
relative of one who destroys.
(Proverbs 18:9)*

No doubt you've heard the story—I don't know its source¹—about the man who'd experienced some sort of industrial accident at work and, in the process of trying to get compensation from his insurance company, had been asked to provide a fuller explanation of his misfortune. What follows is the letter he wrote in response:

Dear Sirs:

I am responding to your request for additional information. In block number three of your accident reporting form, I had originally written "poor planning" as the cause of my accident. You said in your letter that I should explain more fully, and I trust the following details will be sufficient.

I am a bricklayer by trade and on the day of my accident I was working alone on the roof of a six-story building. When I completed my work I discovered that I had about six hundred pounds of bricks left over. Rather than carry the bricks by hand, I decided to lower them in a barrel which, fortunately, was attached to the side of the building at the sixth floor.

Securing the rope at ground level, I went up to the sixth floor and swung the barrel out and loaded the bricks into it. Then I went to the ground and untied the rope. And I held it tightly to insure a slow descent.

You will note in block number seven of your accident reporting form that my weight is listed as 137 pounds. Due to my surprise at being jerked so suddenly off the ground, I lost my presence of mind and forgot to let go of the rope. Needless to say, I proceeded up the side of the building at a rather rapid rate.

In the vicinity of the third floor I met the barrel coming down, and this will explain the fractured skull and broken collarbone. Slowed

only slightly, I continued my rapid ascent, not stopping until the fingers of my right hand were two knuckles deep inside the pulley.

Fortunately, by this time, I had regained my presence of mind and was able to hold tightly to the rope in spite of the intense pain. At approximately the same time however, the barrel of bricks hit the ground. That made the bottom fall out of the barrel.

Devoid of the weight of the bricks, the barrel now weighed some 50 pounds. I refer you again to my weight in block number seven. As you might imagine, I began a rapid descent down the side of the building.

In the vicinity of the third floor I met the barrel coming up. This accounts for the two broken ankles and lacerations on the legs and lower body. The encounter with the barrel slowed me only slightly—but not enough to significantly lessen my injuries when I fell onto the pile of bricks. Fortunately, only three vertebrae were cracked.

I am sorry to report, however, that as I lay there on those bricks—in pain, unable to stand, watching the barrel six floors above me, I again lost my presence of mind...and I let go of the rope.

A lot of painful episodes begin with “poor planning”—and they don’t all involve brick and mortar. Early in my ministry, I witnessed what I fear were the early stages in this same kind of slow-motion disaster. Back in those days, when I went to speak for a church or youth group, I would bunk in the youth worker’s home to help shave expenses. Most of the time, my visits were congenial and comfortable enough. But sometimes I had a front-row seat at various forms of life and ministry dysfunction.

Over the course of our week together, I watched Terry with a combination of pity and awe. I remember one night when he staggered into the bedroom of his small apartment at about 2 a.m. It was the third night in a row Terry had been out late with some of his kids. I awoke just long enough to thank the Lord that Terry wasn’t married, or I might have been a firsthand witness to a domestic assault.

I could hardly believe it when he woke me up at six(!) the next morning to tell me where to find breakfast supplies in the kitchen. He whispered that he was on his way to the church to get everything set up for the youth group activity later that day. It was just the kind of rude awakening that would eventually convince me that staying in hotels was a really good idea, even if it added a little to the expense. I don’t remember precisely what I whispered back to him at that hour, but I think the sentence may have included the word *homicide*.

What struck me about that episode was that Terry was absolutely sold out on giving his life to teenagers—loving them creatively, intensely, and person-

ally—sprinting through his schedule at a breakneck pace that took him over a nineteen-hour obstacle course every day. It seemed sad that someone so in love with Jesus and with kids might, within five to ten years, end up sick, burned-out, divorced—or all of the above. But I’d seen it happen too many times to other well-intentioned youth pastors.

POOR PLANNING AND GOOD SELF-MANAGEMENT

Bricklayers and youth workers who labor under the weight of heavy loads and poor planning don’t need to hear easy answers. Cute slogans and quick-fix plans only add to our stresses. For example, consider this hot tip from chain-store expert (!) Godfrey M. Lebhar: If we reduce our sleep time by two hours a night, devote at least one hour a day less to mealtime chatter, friendly conversation, and leisure activities, and recover an additional hour of work by moving closer to the workplace, thereby reducing the time spent commuting, we could add five and a half years of usable time to our lives!²

In his book *The Tyranny of Time*, Robert Banks observes that most of what we read about time management, even from Christian writers, emphasizes a view of time that underlines urgency: Time is fleeting, and we must grab from it what we can before it’s gone.³ But Banks points out that Scripture never encourages a busy use of time at all, but challenges us to discern appropriate timing.⁴ The apostle Paul puts it this way:

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. (Ephesians 5:15-17)

The key here is discernment and stewardship.

Practicing Discernment: “...not as unwise but as wise...” (Ephesians 5:15)

When we’re overly concerned about how much time we’re spending, we’ll be overly concerned about time running out—and that leads to pointless, feverish activity (See Philippians 4:6). Wise youth workers practice the discipline of discernment with regard to their time.

Most of us are locked into one of two basic approaches to time. Christian management consultant Fred Smith describes the two approaches this way:

One is the technological: Minutes as units. The other is the philosophical: Minutes as meaning. It’s possible to grasp the technological view so tightly that you end up with no meaning. Technology should always be the servant of philosophy. Too often people don’t know the difference between a fast track and a frantic track.⁵

And the frantic track almost always leads to poor planning.

There are two factors that make us vulnerable to this frantic pace—two factors especially prominent among youth workers.

1. Vanity. We want to feel important, necessary.⁶ In Eugene Peterson's words, "We don't like being wallflowers at the world's party."⁷ So we say "yes" when we should say "no." It's not enough to lead a Young Life club, serve as a youth pastor, or volunteer with the youth group. There must be something beyond the pastoral tasks that gives us importance. We fill our Day-Timers and Blackberries with appointments and activities so there can be no question that God really needs us and kids really need us and "doggone it, people like us." We seek validation by seeking invitations to speak outside of our normal sphere of ministry, or by pursuing opportunities to write, or by participating on boards and commissions. All of these are valid and important opportunities, but they are, nonetheless, opportunities that consume us with activity and take us away from our central task of discipling the same group of kids week after week.

2. Slothfulness. Just as dangerous, but perhaps a little more insidious, is our tendency toward what the Scripture calls *slothfulness* (See Proverbs 18:9; Ecclesiastes 10:18). A *sloth* is a tropical mammal that lives much of its life hanging upside down from tree branches. On the rare occasion each day when it descends from the tree, it crawls along at a blistering ten feet per minute, which means it would take a sloth just under nine hours to run a kick-off all the way down a football field. Most notable is the sloth's reputation for sluggishness and inactivity. Building no nests and seeking no shelter, even for its young, the sloth prefers to sleep, typically anywhere from 15 to 22 hours a day. When the sloth finally awakens in late afternoon, it's only to eat whatever leaves may be close at hand. Finally, true to its reputation for slow movement, a sloth defecates only once every three to fourteen days (and then, only when it's raining).⁸

It may strike some as ironic that slothfulness would be identified as a cause of busyness. And yet, as C.S. Lewis was fond of pointing out, lazy people often work the hardest. When we don't do the hard work of setting goals and priorities, saying "yes" to some activities and "no" to others, the task is left to other people. And when that happens, we find ourselves frantic and weary, seeking to serve the many last-minute masters who make demands on our time.

Slothfulness then, as John Ortberg reminds us, isn't the absence of activity. It is "the failure to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done."⁹ We end up like the kamikaze pilot who flew 17 missions—he was extremely busy, but he wasn't doing what he supposed to do when he was supposed to do it. That is why slothful people are often consumed by increasing activity coupled with diminishing contentment. Frederick Buechner says this:

"A slothful man...may be a very busy man. He is a man who goes through the motions, who flies on automatic pilot. Like a man with a bad head cold, he has mostly lost his sense of taste and smell. He

knows something's wrong with him, but not enough to do anything about it. Other people come and go, but through glazed eyes he hardly notices them. He is letting things run their course. He is getting through his life..."¹⁰

As youth workers who face constant and unending demands in our work with teenagers, we need to reshape our thinking and practice discernment about personal management. The frantic youth worker is often a blur of busyness, always going somewhere and late for the next place, multitasking with the ever-present Blackberry or iPhone, playing catch-up and praying someone will cancel an appointment. Smith sums up the principle: "Opportunity is *not* a mandate to *do*." We have only so many fingers to plug the holes in the dike.

Of course, there are those who will say, "I'd rather burn out than rust out." I suppose if I had to choose between only those two options, I would agree. But are those our only two options—"burn out" or "rust out"? What about "time out"? What about "plan out"? (And, for those of you who came of age in the 60s, what about "far out"?) Donald Bloesch is right when he says that in modern Christianity "busyness is the new holiness."¹¹ Lack of time has become a badge of spirituality. John Wesley wrote, "Though I am always in haste, I am never in a hurry because I never undertake more work than I can go through with calmness of spirit."

According to the gospel writers, Jesus was determined and single-minded, but he never seemed to be in a hurry. Even in those situations when haste might have seemed appropriate (the death of his friend Lazarus, for instance), Jesus took his time. He had three years to establish the kingdom, three years to recruit and train his disciples, three years to prepare for the redemption of all creation, and yet he never seemed to feel the pressure of time.

I'm convinced one of the keys to discernment with regard to our time is learning to convincingly and graciously use the word *no*. Doug Fields, who is as good at saying "no" as anybody I've ever met, reminds us we aren't really serious about what we say "yes" to unless we are willing to protect it by saying "no" to other things.¹² Marlene Wilson, in her book *Survival Skills for Managers*, says it well: "The true meaning of a leader is not what he or she does, but what he or she decides to leave undone."¹³

Discernment of time begins with living on purpose—being fully present in the moment, instead of being stressed out about the next moment: In other words, "not as unwise but as wise."

Practicing Stewardship: "...making the most of every opportunity..." (Ephesians 5:16)

No less important than the discipline of discernment is the discipline of stewardship—making the most of every opportunity. Marlene Wilson writes:

how easy it is to misuse our time because of misunderstandings about the way our time is spent. She refers to these misunderstandings as paradoxes in time management.¹⁴

The open-door paradox. We youth workers practice an open-door policy that says to the students in the youth group, "I am available anytime if you need to talk." That means we always have students hanging around in our office. Our intentions are good, but paradoxically, students who really need to talk about their problems are embarrassed to bring them forward in a place crawling with other kids. Consequently, they may never get to discuss the problems with us at all. We have discouraged the very thing we hoped to accomplish.

Tyranny-of-the-urgent paradox. Youth ministers tend to scamper around putting out fires instead of doing the kind of long-range planning effective ministry requires. The result is that long-range planning is neglected, thereby ensuring future crises and more fires to fight. Moral to the story: Busyness is *not* next to godliness.

Cluttered-desk paradox. We leave items on our desk so we won't forget them. But as the pile of important materials mounts up, the items on the desk get lost or misplaced, and we forget them altogether. Or occasionally a critical note resurfaces as the pile changes shape, reminding us that we need to act on an important matter, and that matter of urgency distracts us from what we were originally doing.

High tech/low efficiency paradox. We try to save time by sending a text message, but because we can use only a limited number of characters, the abbreviated message requires further elaboration, which leads to additional texts, which take longer—and it's all less clear than a simple phone call would have been.

Delegation paradox. We don't bring on new leaders (adults or youth) because we don't have time to train them. But if we spent the time in recruitment, training, and delegation, we would have far more time in the long run.

Virtual communication paradox. Everyday we have more tools and technologies that allow us to communicate, but the maintenance of these tools (checking e-mails, being preoccupied with incoming texts while meeting with someone else, combing through spam, obsessing over a Twitter message, surfing the Web) often distracts us from quality face-to-face interaction. Technologies designed to facilitate communication end up impeding it.

Each of these myths cripples our stewardship of time and leads us to misuse the time we have. But these are blunders made through wrong thinking. Sometimes our worst misuses of time are the simple result of *not* thinking at all. The greatest single mismanagement of our time is rooted in inadequate self-discipline, which manifests itself in a number of ways:

Double-mindedness. We waste time thinking about the next project while we're working on this project, and thereby take twice the time to complete this project.

Distraction. If I were in an addicts' support group, I would have to introduce myself by saying, "My name is Duffy Robbins, and I am a browser." I browse bookstores, hardware stores, library bookshelves, fascinating Web sites, even my own files. And it's all interesting stuff! But my lack of discipline and abundance of curiosity can turn a quick trip to the store into an extended trip to Vanity Fair. I begin by doing a Google search on the words *sloth* and *defecate*, and I end up wandering off into Web articles about how screech owls bring blind snakes to their nests to help kill parasites. It makes me fun at parties, but it squanders needed prep time.

Compulsive behaviors. Sometimes we waste time adding unnecessary touches. How much do you really need to Photoshop that background slide? And what about the flyer for the winter camp: Is it really necessary for the production to merit an art award in the category of "Composition, Art Work, Creativity, Profundity, Social Consciousness, and Hilarity"? It's a flyer, for heaven's sake!

And then, there are the e-compulsions. Do you really need to respond to every post on Facebook? Is it really essential to check your e-mail every five minutes? What would be the cost to the kingdom if you just turned off the BlackBerry or iPod for the entire mealtime? And, okay, fine, you're on Twitter—but does the world really need to know about the rash on the back of your left thigh? Beware the compulsion that distracts you from your commission.

Socializing. Youth workers are sociable people. We like to talk and visit, even when we have other work that deserves our attention. I used to work in a ministry in which the normal routine for the morning was an extended coffee break. And there was an unspoken assumption that anyone who passed on the coffee break in favor of doing necessary work was angry or upset about something. None of us intended to be shirking our duties, but the breaks got longer and longer. (We finally had to limit the coffee break to 45 minutes because it was interfering with our lunch hour.)

Poor organization. For decades, there were rumors in the neighborhood about the two reclusive brothers who made their home in the Harlem brownstone on Fifth Avenue in New York City. Homer Collyer and his brother, Langley, obsessively collected newspapers, books, furniture, musical instruments, and many other items, with booby traps set up in corridors and doorways around their house to protect against intruders. When police finally found their dead bodies in March 1947, the corpses were surrounded by over 130 tons of rubbish and filth they had gathered over several decades.¹⁵

A scenic tour through the canyons of books, gear, resources, and empty Red Bull cans in the average youth worker's office suggests that some of us suffer from *Collyer Syndrome*. One study concluded that the typical American spends an average of one year of his or her life looking for lost objects. For youth

workers, it may be more than that. We waste a lot of time trying to find “that study we did two years ago,” “the letter we wrote to the deacons last quarter,” “the original install disk,” or “the small child that wandered in from the nursery.” A little better organization could allow us to invest that time more profitably.¹⁶

Procrastination. This should probably have been mentioned much earlier in the chapter, because it may be the biggest time-waster. The great thing about procrastination is that it isn’t as clear-cut as blatant postponement of a task. Procrastination allows us to avoid something by doing *something!* And we can be very creative. We procrastinate by over-researching, over-praying, over-waiting-on-God. Procrastination is an especially attractive option when we don’t want to complete the task anyway. How often do we procrastinate and put off a task because we consider it a waste of time when the greater waste of time occurs simply because we don’t just plunge in and get the job done?

Indecision. Sometimes, the more we desire to be sensitive to God’s leading, the slower we are to follow it. Bill was a younger youth minister friend who was so zealous in his waiting on God that he never did anything. I used to jokingly tell him, “I think God is the one waiting on you.” He loved Christ, and he loved the ministry; but he was so fearful of making a wrong decision that he never made any decisions. This tendency cost him several significant ministry opportunities before he learned to start moving. Faithfulness is not waiting until everything is clear and absolutely certain. Faith is acting on what we know and trusting God to help us with what we don’t know and might face. It’s easier to steer a moving vehicle.

The momentum of the culture pushes us to move faster, do more, make it happen, and multitask. The momentum of the gospel spurs us to move with intention, to focus on being as well as doing, to do all we do with excellence as serving the Lord. To use Paul’s words, we should be “making the most of every opportunity.”

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Practically speaking, that kind of stewardship begins by setting firm priorities. As we’ve already observed, it’s tough to say “no” until we’ve determined to what or to whom we will say “yes.” Our willingness to set firm priorities and to stick with an action plan that gives those priorities expression is one of the toughest tests of leadership. As Alec MacKenzie says,

One of the measures of a manager is his/her ability to distinguish the important from the urgent, to refuse to be tyrannized by the urgent, to refuse to be managed by the crisis. They must forget the unnecessary and ignore the irrelevant.¹⁷

The difficulty of sticking with priorities confronted me in my first youth ministry position. At the interview I said I felt called to disciple students—and that this would determine the way I programmed for the youth ministry. Everyone agreed with this policy—until I cut the traditional summer camp the students went to every year in favor of some activities that would better achieve our primary purpose of discipleship. The retreat was a nice idea, but it didn’t fit our immediate goals and objectives concerning discipleship. While I wanted to take advantage of some summer-camp ministry, I was not prepared to spend budgeted money on that particular site, with the traditional group of students who took part in that particular retreat.

The three-day blizzard of phone calls and complaints was uncomfortable, to say the least. People were happy for me to have objectives and goals, as long as they didn’t interfere with the way they’d always done things. But I came out of the experience with no permanent scars and one valuable lesson: Any time we take a stand for something, we can almost guarantee we will be standing on somebody’s foot. If we take priorities and goals seriously, we should be prepared for a few screams and gasps. Our willingness to set priorities grows out of a confidence in who we are called to be and what we believe God has called us to do.