

Getting Organized:

50 ideas for more effective use of your time

by Roger Neugebauer

Recently I received a note from a former subscriber who commented: "I love *Child Care Information Exchange*; but I let my subscription expire because, being a director, I never have time to read it." This really got my adrenaline flowing. I decided it was a problem of crisis proportions if directors were so crunched for time that they couldn't read *Child Care Information Exchange*!

So in order to help directors regain control of how they spend their time (and to avoid losing subscribers), I pulled together the following list of 50 practical time management techniques. These were selected to deal with the most common time problems of child care directors—too much paperwork, too many tasks, too many crises, too many interruptions, and too little time to relax.

Cut Down on Paperwork

Paperwork has become a major source of frustration for child care directors. In fact government researchers estimate that every year four centers are totally buried in a blitz of paperwork and red tape and 3500 directors are afflicted by chronic paper cuts. While scientists have not yet discovered a cure for the common paperwork, there are some techniques for treating its symptoms:

- **Engage in Creative Waste Basketry.** Be guided by the maxim, "When in doubt, throw it out." Don't kid yourself. If you don't need that brochure on "101 Classroom Uses for Used Egg Cartons" today, you probably won't need it two years from now either. Throw it out. Don't be constrained by a small wastebasket which fills up fast and discourages your urge to purge. Buy a large wastebasket and use it freely.
- **Don't Become a Paperwork Junkie.** Don't become part of the problem by creating unnecessary paperwork. When you are about to write a memo, draft a report, or develop a new form, ask yourself, "What is the worst that could happen if this activity went unrecorded?" If the answer is not too serious, save the paper. Also, whenever possible, communicate messages to persons outside the center by phone rather than by mail. Most messages can be relayed more quickly and more accurately that way (Mackenzie). When answering letters where a short reply will suffice, jot your answer on the original letter and send it back.
- **Don't Be a Copycat.** Resist the urge to make 25 photocopies of everything that crosses your desk. While many

others may have a "right" to know or even a "need" to know about everything you do, let's face it, they probably don't have a "want" to know about most of it.

- **Master the Art of Dictating.** Letters can be transcribed about five times faster than they can be written out in long-hand. Additionally, this can be done while waiting for appointments, traveling to and from work, or relaxing in an easy chair at home.
- **Handle Mail Once.** Reserve a specific time in the day to devote about 15 minutes to handling the day's mail. As much as possible, try to take appropriate action on each letter at once. If a letter requires a short response, don't put it down until you have responded. If the letter requires more involved investigation, strive to at least take one step to move it closer to completion (Lakein). Throw out as much as possible, and label everything else for appropriate filing.
- **File in Batches.** On the upper right-hand corner of any material that needs to be retained, write the name of the file in which it should go, and place it in a "to be filed" basket. Once every week or so set aside 10-15 minutes to file everything in the basket.

- **Streamline Filing.** The purpose of a filing system is to provide ready access to information you need. Two guidelines apply. First, keep files you use on a regular basis within easy reach of your desk. Keep all other files organized, but out of the way. Second, keep the system as simple as possible. Try to divide your files into as few functional categories as possible. If you set up large numbers of specific categories, when trying to find a particular file you'll not only have to remember the name of the file but also the name of the category. Within each category organize all files in alphabetical order.
- **Purge Files Periodically.** Many people just keep accumulating records year after year. They can tell you how much pencils cost them back in 1937, but their offices are so crowded with files that they can't find the pencils they bought last week (Frost). At least once a year you should review your files to see how much can be discarded. Experts in records retention report that 90% of all files are never referred to after their first year. Strive to retain only the correspondence, general reference, and historical files that there is an obvious important reason for retaining. Check with your lawyer or accountant to determine how long legal and financial records must be retained. Once again, exercise the guideline, "When in doubt, throw it out."

Work Smarter, Not Harder

The key to effective time use is to identify those tasks which are most vital to the success of yourself or your organization and to focus your efforts on completing them. What is important is not how much work gets done, but what work it is that gets done. By concentrating energies on a limited number of high impact tasks, a director can accomplish more in 35 hours than a director who toils for 60 hours over less important tasks.

- **Compile a "To Do" List.** On a single (long) sheet of paper list everything you have to do. Include on this list all tasks from the most mundane (clean desk) to the most critical (hire a new teacher). Don't limit the list to those things that happen to be on your desk at the time. Be sure to include your short and long range goals for yourself (increase reading speed) and for your organization (initiate school age day care component).
- **Set Priorities.** Once you have completed your undoubtedly lengthy "to do" list, it is time to rank the tasks on this list in order of importance. If your list doesn't have more than three or four major projects, it may be easiest for you to identify the task that is most important and number it "1" and then number all other tasks in descending order of importance. If your list is more complex, it may be helpful first to subdivide your original list into three new lists:

List A—Quality Tasks

List B—Survival Tasks

List C—Routine Tasks

Put on List A all the tasks which will be beneficial in upgrading the quality or range of services your organization provides, or in improving your professional skills. Examples of A tasks are: "Organizing a series of curriculum workshops for teachers" or "Opening a new infant care component".

On List B include all the tasks which must be completed on a timely basis to assure the survival or stable operation of the organization. B tasks might include: "Filing quarterly tax payment," or "Enrolling ten new families". Place all remaining tasks on List C.

Finally, within each list number all tasks in order of importance. For instance, the task on List A which will

provide the most beneficial impact should be labeled number #1. Then, all other tasks on List A should be numbered in order of descending importance.

- **Start at the Top.** The key to effective time management is to work on your most important tasks first. Having prioritized your A, B, and C Lists, you should, therefore, focus your energies in the coming week to accomplishing the tasks at the top of your A and B Lists.

You should strive to strike a reasonable balance in the amount of time you devote to A (quality) and B (survival) tasks. Unfortunately, what too often happens is that nearly all of a director's time is devoted to survival tasks. If your center is operating on the brink of financial disaster, you may barely have time to breathe between crises, let alone work on quality tasks.

Even under stable conditions it is easy to defer a quality task since it doesn't convey the same sense of urgency as a survival task. Nonetheless, if you fail to exert leadership in upgrading your center's services, these services may degenerate to the point where the center no longer deserves to survive.

- **Avoid the Activity Trap.** It is also easy to fall into the trap of wasting time on non-productive tasks. It is often tempting to avoid difficult high priority tasks by being very busy with routine tasks. Such tasks as filing letters, answering phone calls, and reorganizing the desk, do require hard work and can yield a sense of accomplishment since many items will be checked off your "to do" list by the end of the week (Odiorne). However, this sense of accomplishment will be illusory if the activities fail to contribute significantly toward the survival and upgrading of your center.

As time management consultant Alan Lakein recommends, you should strive to work smarter, concentrating your efforts on high priority tasks, not harder, occupying your time with low priority tasks.

- **Know Your Limits.** In setting to work on high priority tasks, you should be realistic about how much you can accomplish in the time available to you. You must be prepared to admit that you cannot complete all your work every week. In order to get important tasks done, you must be willing to let less important tasks go undone.

Likewise, you should be realistic in the amount of time you budget for completing high priority tasks. Don't plan to complete the annual budget and redesign the three-year-old room on Monday when you know that either task could take more than a day. You will only be setting yourself up to be frustrated when you fail to meet your deadlines.

- **Utilize Your Best Skills.** You can get much more work done by sticking to what you do best. One manager, for example, rates each task from one to ten, according to how well it matches his best skills. He then works only on the tasks that rate over a seven. The rest he delegates to other staff members or to outside experts who can handle them more effectively than he can (Boardroom Reports, July 14, 1980).

If the most important tasks confronting you consistently require skills which are not your strong points, and which are not possessed by your staff members, you may need to look for training in those areas or consider restructuring your center's staffing to bring on a person with those skills.

Control Your Time

The constant swirl of activity in the typi-

cal child care center does not naturally allow a director to concentrate undivided attention on high priority tasks. To regain control of your time, it might help to schedule in advance the use of your time. Draw up a blank schedule for your typical week. Mark off any times that are irreversibly committed already. Then consider blocking off your remaining hours as follows:

- **Get Results from Prime Time.** This is the time in your week reserved for working exclusively on A and B tasks. Ideally the bulk of your time, 15 to 25 hours per week, should be blocked out as Prime Time. During this time you should concentrate your undivided attention on high priority tasks. To be most effective you should schedule it at times when you are typically most alert and energetic and when you are least likely to be interrupted. Some directors find they can get the most done by coming in at 7 AM, while others concentrate best late in the evenings.

- **Be Available During Interaction Time.** Since you will strive to avoid all personal contacts, except those which you initiate, during Prime Time, you need to set aside an hour or more every day (ideally the same time every day) for interacting with others. If your staff members know there will be a time they can talk to you every day, they will be less likely to interrupt you during your Prime Time.

During Interaction Time you should return calls you received during your Prime Time, be available to discuss problems or ideas with staff members, hold staff meetings, meet with parents, schedule meetings with outside parties, or make daily rounds of the classrooms

- **Limit Routine Tasks Time.** Set aside a small block of time every week for attacking non-urgent tasks that must

be done. Do as many of the most important tasks from your C List as you can during this time, and then set the remainder aside for the following week.

- **Utilize Lunch Time, Too.** Coffee breaks and lunch times should be put to productive use as well as work times. If you are working under a lot of pressure, you should work at relaxing during your break times. Get away from the center, read a book, take a walk, or jog. Enjoy yourself, and don't bring your work along.

Some directors find lunch times to be a convenient time to spend alone with individual staff members. Others find that lunch time combined with nap time is the quietest time in the center, the time when they are most able to concentrate on A and B tasks.

- **Reserve Crisis Time.** The best laid scheduling plans often go awry when the school van breaks down or the lead teacher in the three-year-old room calls in sick twenty minutes before the children arrive. To prepare for these inevitable crises, your weekly schedule should include some uncommitted hours, especially toward the end of the week. Ideally, these free hours should be scheduled after Prime Time hours so that if no crises occur you can simply keep on working on high priority tasks.

If you are hit with a major, time consuming crisis, be prepared to sacrifice Prime Time; but don't then become discouraged and abandon all future efforts to control your time. As soon as possible force yourself to get back on schedule.

- **Protect Your Leisure Time.** Child care directors must be prepared to devote certain evenings or weekends to handling unavoidable crises and to attending meetings and conferences. What should be resisted vigorously, however, is falling into the habit of routinely giv-

ing up your leisure hours to work. Robbing your leisure time in this way can have a negative impact on your health, alienate your friends and family, cause you to resent your job and drain your energy so that your effectiveness and alertness is reduced during working hours.

In addition, falling into the home work habit can become a vicious cycle as you feel less pressure to complete work during the day because you tell yourself you can get it done at night (Bliss).

- **Solicit Cooperation.** If you are to succeed in setting aside blocks of Prime Time to concentrate on high priority tasks, you will need to gain the support and understanding of people who frequently interact with you. It is quite possible that staff members will become resentful if you are unavailable most of the time. Before you start your first week on a schedule you set, you should meet with your staff to explain what you are doing and to ask for their cooperation in making it work. If they appreciate that what you are doing is in the best interest of the program, they will be more likely to respect your privacy during Prime Time.

Also, when staff do come to you with a problem, see to it that you are attentive and helpful. Their resentment of your time management efforts is likely to dissipate if they see that you are, in fact, still able to help them with their problems.

Likewise, identify individuals outside the staff who most frequently interrupt you with calls and visits. Ask for their cooperation as well, and advise them when your Interaction Time is so they will know when you will be available.

- **Don't Expect Instant Success.** Direc-

tors who have been successful in gaining control over the scheduling of their time have found that they did not notice a significant improvement immediately. Even though they may have fully intended to devote 20 or more hours to high priority tasks that first week, they found that once the week began, they were continually distracted by phone calls, visitors, and their own procrastination. It was not until about the third or fourth week that they finally were able to log significant numbers of hours of uninterrupted Prime Time. It may take this long to break old work practices and to get others to adjust to your schedule.

Fight Procrastination

It has been said, "There's no time like the present for postponing what you don't want to do." Indeed procrastination is the number one enemy of effective time management. Faced with a difficult or unpleasant task, it is extremely tempting to yield to countless distractions and more enjoyable tasks. The following are some suggestions for dispelling the fascination of procrastination:

- **Confront Yourself.** Much procrastination is unintentional: you allow yourself to be sidetracked without thinking about it. Often such mindless diversions can be avoided by asking yourself, "What's the best use of my time and energy right now?" If the answer is not what you are doing at the moment, stop that and put your time and energy to work on a more important task (LeBoeuf).
- **Attack Ugly Tasks First.** When you start the day, it may be most effective to dispense with the most unpleasant task on your priority list first. If you postpone working on this task, you will most likely fret about it all day, thus preventing yourself from concen-

trating your full attention on other tasks you attempt.

- **Create Instant Tasks.** Sometimes it helps to take a major task you're avoiding and break out some easy sub-tasks which you can readily start. For example, if the major task is filling out income tax reports, instant tasks could include pulling together all the necessary income and expense documents, filling out the identifying information on the forms, or reading the instructions on filling out the forms. Once you get rolling on these "instant tasks," you might establish some momentum that will carry you well into the major task (Lakein).
- **Establish Familiarity.** It may help to get started on an intimidating task by establishing some familiarity with it. If the task is developing the budget, you might reduce your resistance to starting by reading articles on preparing budgets.
- **Offer Yourself A Reward.** Try to give yourself some incentives for completing major tasks. Promise yourself, for example, that when you complete a difficult task at hand you can go out and have a lobster salad sandwich or call up a fellow director you enjoy chatting with.
- **Put Pressure on Yourself.** Don't allow yourself the luxury of extra time for procrastinating. Give yourself a deadline for a task that does not allow you any leeway for wasting time.
- **Take Advantage of Your Moods.** How many times have you said, "I'm just not in the mood?". You should use your moods to your advantage. For example, you may not feel like writing that report today, but you may feel like organizing the next staff training session. Remember those high priority tasks you have been delaying and put your moods to work

for you (LeBoeuf).

- **Complete What You Start.** Once you've overcome the inertia of getting started and are rolling on a difficult task, it is a mistake to stop. Try to finish a task or a complete unit of a task in one setting. If you stop, you may well waste additional time getting organized and getting rolling again.
- **Leave Work Starters Behind.** Sometimes it is impossible to complete a task when you leave for the day or go to lunch or head to a meeting. On these occasions it may help to get right back into the swing of the task you left behind if you stop at a point where the next step is obvious. Then when you return you won't need to waste time trying to decide where to begin.
- **Close Escape Routes.** Everyone has their favorite routes for escaping from doing unpleasant tasks. These may include wandering into the classrooms to chat with the teachers and the children, reading the newspaper, staring out the window, or leaving the center to run unimportant errands. To avoid procrastinating in these ways, try to cut off all opportunities to take advantage of them. For example, work somewhere far removed from the classrooms, don't bring the newspaper to work, close the curtains, and don't bring your car to work for running errands. Make it inconvenient to use escape routes (Lakein).

Avoid Time Wasters

"Meetings, visitors, and telephone calls are not necessarily unproductive any more than gunpowder is a necessarily destructive substance. It's all a matter of application." (LeBoeuf). Unfortunately, the seeming legitimacy of these common time wasters allows them to eat up large chunks of child care directors' productive time. The following are some

suggestions for counteracting the wasteful aspects of these occurrences:

- **Avoid Attending Meetings.** Don't go to meetings where there is not clear benefit for you or your organization, or where you have nothing to contribute. Explore alternatives to meetings. For example, a decision by a responsible party can eliminate the need for group action. A conference call may substitute for getting together. Delay holding a meeting until all the facts relating to an action are available. When all else fails send a representative in your place (Mackenzie).
- **Keep Meetings Short.** Start meetings on time. Announce the ending time at the outset and stick to it. Schedule meetings near the end of the day so that participants will be eager for it to end. Circulate an agenda prior to the meeting and stick to it. Keep attendance at meetings as small as possible. Be clear at the outset what is to be accomplished at the meeting and discourage sidetracking. Hold meetings in rooms without chairs or at least with uncomfortable chairs so that participants will not be inclined to let the meeting last longer than absolutely necessary (Mackenzie).
- **Discourage Drop-In Visitors.** While you, as the director, will want to maintain good personal relationships with people you work with, you cannot afford to be continually distracted from accomplishing center business by drop-in visitors. To discourage prolonged social visits, a number of simple measures may help. Avoid making eye contact with every passer-by. Close your office door when concentrating, or face your desk away from the door. Remove excess chairs and other social amenities from your office to avoid playing the informal host. If someone unexpectedly walks into your office, stand up and confer with him while standing. Such body lan-

guage usually indicates to the visitor that you're busy and have more pressing things to do. If someone knocks on your door, confer with him outside the office. Once again, the idea is to keep visitors from firmly planting themselves in your office (LeBoeuf).

- **Meet Elsewhere.** When you need to meet with someone else, agree to meet in their office. You can control the length of the meeting since you can leave at any time (Inc., August, 1981).
 - **Control Phone Calls.** Avoid taking calls during Prime Time hours. If you have the luxury of a secretary, provide him with a list of callers to put through and have him take messages from all others. If you must take calls yourself, explain what you are doing and promise to call back at an agreed upon time. If calls are still a problem consider investing in a phone recorder to record messages during your Prime Time.
- When making calls, if you must ask for someone to call back, give a preferred time. Make a note of the best time to reach anyone you expect to call frequently (Inc., August, 1981). Buy a small, three-minute timer and put it by your phone. Every time you get a call or make one, see if you can successfully complete it in three minutes (LeBoeuf).
- **Get a Hideaway.** Some directors have found that when they really need to work undisturbed, they must get away from the center. Some can accomplish this by working at home occasionally. Others succeed by fleeing to a quiet corner in the local library.

Adopt Time Savers

While the key to effective time management is being able to concentrate on

doing the most important tasks first, there are definite advantages to adopting some time saving techniques as well. Although time freed up by time savers may seem incidental, the cumulative effect can be significant. Each new way to save ten minutes a day gives you more than 60 hours a year of "extra" time (Boardroom Reports, December 15, 1980).

- **Learn to Say No.** Of all time saving techniques ever developed, perhaps the most effective is the frequent use of the word "no." You cannot protect your priorities unless you learn to decline tactfully, but firmly, every request for your time that does not contribute to the achievement of your personal goals or the goals of your center (Bliss).

Sometimes it is most tempting to say "yes" when you are asked to do something well in the future when you at last expect "to be on top of things." Before you say "yes" to a commitment for the future, however, see if you would have time for it now. If you don't have time now, chances are you won't later. Say "no" (Boardroom Reports, July 28, 1980).

- **Delegate Tasks.** A most effective option when you are overworked is to delegate to other staff members some of your tasks. This option, however, is often rejected by directors. Suffering from the classic workaholic syndrome, they believe, "I must do everything myself; no one else here has enough interest, time, knowledge, or ability." This attitude is often mistaken on all counts. Not only can delegating relieve some of your workload, it can also provide a change of pace for teachers and give them a greater sense of involvement in the overall life of the center.

When delegating work to other staff members, delegate important work.

Don't waste their time and talents on trivial or low priority work. When delegating work, give the individuals involved the full assignment in advance. Don't dribble assignments out piece by piece. Give staff the opportunity to plan and be responsible for a complete unit of work. Then once you've made the assignment, leave them alone; don't be continually looking over their shoulders and second guessing their work (Mackenzie).

- **Consolidate Tasks.** When confronted with a batch of smaller tasks, it is most efficient to consolidate tasks by category and complete them all at once. For example, initiate and return all phone calls during one period rather than sporadically throughout the day. Do all errands at once rather than making two or three trips out of the center each day. Take care of all financial tasks at the same time.
- **Read Selectively.** This is becoming the age of information overload. Step into any director's office and you will see rows and stacks of books, magazines, newspapers, memos, reports, and bulletins everywhere. There is always too much to read and too little time. The main solution is to read selectively, to zero in on reading that which is most beneficial. With a book or magazine, first scan the table of contents to determine what articles, chapters, or parts of chapters may contain ideas you can use. Then only read those potentially beneficial sections. If nothing of relevance jumps out at you, don't bother with the publication at all.
- **Read Faster.** The extravagant claims of most speed-reading crusaders tend to make the practice appear less than credible. Nonetheless, most people could significantly increase their reading speed by adopting the underlying techniques of speed reading. Increase your reading span by taking in

groups of words rather than single words. Stop moving your head from side to side as you read. Stop rereading. Start with the second or third word of each line to stop wasting peripheral vision on margins (Mackenzie).

- **Organize Your Work Space.** Efficiency experts recommend that you should have absolutely nothing on your desk except that which relates to the task you are working on at the time. Most directors would find this somewhat less than realistic. However, the reasoning underlying this ivory tower advice is valid. The more things in your immediate work space, the more you are likely to be distracted from the task at hand. Make a list of all the tools, supplies, books, and files which you utilize on a daily basis. Make sure these items can be reached without leaving your chair. As much as possible remove everything else from your immediate work area.
- **Make Your Work Space Comfortable.** Some directors seem to believe there is some value in working under Spartan conditions. In fact, an uncomfortable work space is only a distraction that serves to hinder productivity. As Michael LeBoeuf observes, "Life is already filled with a more than ample supply of discomforts, distractions, and frustrations." Why add more?
- **Use a Pocket Diary.** Brilliant ideas, dates, and people to remember often occur when you are away from your desk. To keep from losing these key bits of information, always keep a pocket diary/appointment book with you. This will also save you the time of having to sift through dozens of scraps of paper to find that vital note.
- **Avoid Perfectionism.** There is a difference between striving for excellence and striving for perfection. The

first is attainable, gratifying, and healthy. The second is often unattainable, frustrating and neurotic. It can also be a terrible waste of time. As Edwin Bliss suggests, "Spend a reasonable amount of time on tasks striving for a 'sensible approximation' of perfection."

- **Carry Five-Minute Tasks.** Keep with you a batch of five-minute tasks such as memos to write, letters to answer, articles to read, or questionnaires to complete. Whenever you end up having to wait for meetings, buses, or doctors, pull out these tasks and polish off a few (Boardroom Reports, June 14, 1978).
- **Keep Fit.** Your ability to work hard over long periods of time is dependent upon your physical vigor. Being in good shape through regular exercise will increase the number of hours you are able to work alertly and effectively during the day (Bliss).

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