TIME MANAGEMENT

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING ONE OF THE SCARCEST RESOURCES OF ALL.

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Before I begin to talk about time management, I think it is appropriate for me to share with you some of the reasons why effective time management is particularly important in my work.

As the chairperson has already stated, I am presently working as a Lecturer / Practitioner in Northern Ireland. As the name suggests this is a double post or a joint appointment. This means that I am jointly based at the Department of Nursing, University of Ulster, Coleraine and the Nursing Development Unit, Whiteabbey Hospital. The post is also jointly funded by both organizations and I am dually accountable both to the Head of Department at the University and to the Nursing Services Manager at Whiteabbey. So in typical week, half my time is spent at the University and the other half at the N.D.U.

It is also important to note that the University is situated approximately 50 miles from the hospital rendering it impossible to move between sites on any particular day. This has major implications for the way I organize my work and my time as I must plan my days at both sites very carefully.

Time is a very scarce resource. It is irreplaceable and irreversible. Changes in the system of health care and in the roles and responsibilities of ward sisters and charge nurses, emphasise the need for more effective management of all scarce resources, time being one of the scarcest resources of all. In addition to managerial and clinical responsibilities, you have an educational and research remit to your work. You must therefore organize your time to ensure that you fulfill all of these roles.

This paper examines some strategies used in effective time management. The object of this paper is not to make effective managers of you all but rather to focus your thoughts on your own management of time and to make some simple but effective recommendations for improvement.

DEVELOPING A PERSONAL SENSE OF TIME.
One of the first steps in effective time management is the development of a personal sense of time. The key suggestion here is that you should keep a time log, a record of how you are spending your time. You may think that you already know how you spend your time but I challenge you to keep a time log for 1-2 weeks. If at the end of that time you fail to identify any areas of improvement, then I am afraid that the wrong person is presenting this paper.

Although there are a number of different ways of keeping a time log, the following is the method recommended by the Staff Development Training Officer at the University, and one that I have found particularly useful (see acetate 2).

At the beginning of your chosen day, (preferably a typical day) write down the most important goals you need to achieve or substantially progress on the day. Use the space in Section 1 of the time log, ‘MAIN GOALS OF THE DAY’. At the end of your chosen day, make a tick against all those activities that were associated with this main goal.

It is vital that as you progress through the day you log the activities as they occur. Your description of the activity may be brief, for example meetings, telephoning, reading reports etc. Log the start times and at the end of the day calculate the percentage of total time spent on each activity.

As you progress through the day, note against each activity the priority rating and make a judgment about how much time could have been saved on the activity. Clearly you cannot be precise about this time saving, but make a rough assessment of the potential savings if you or your colleagues had managed time more effectively. Throughout the day assess whether the activity you are working on could have been delegated to another member of your staff.

When you have completed your time log review the weeks activities. You may be surprised what a comparatively small percentage of your time is spent on the top priority tasks on your list. Analyse and consider the way you have organised, planned, used and wasted your time for the duration of the time log and propose specific actions to improve your performance in this area.

At this stage it is worthwhile referring to the Pareto Principle which, when applied to time management states that 80% of our activities are responsible for 20% of our achievements. Studies of managers at work confirm that most of
us mismanage our time. Yet time is our scarcest resource. Unless it is managed nothing else can be managed.

**PLANNING THE DAY**

It is an essential discipline to compile a programme for the day. Start by making out a list of what you would like to achieve or substantially progress on the day. Do this out the evening before so that you can sleep on it. Set time limits for all tasks. Get in to the habit of always estimating the amount of time required to do each job, such as, writing a report or doing a staff appraisal. Check afterwards if your estimates were realistic. Then establish your priorities. You will probably not reach the bottom of your A and B list but don’t let this bother you. If you have worked according to your sense of priorities you will have done the important jobs, and that is what managing your time is all about.

**LEARNING TO SAY NO**

Effectiveness at work depends on knowing what not to do. Over commitment is a sure road to failure. When you say no, if possible say it promptly. Thus you will avoid raising false hopes only to be dashed later. Such vague phrases as “Let me think about it” or “I don’t know” breed an air of expectation. Of course, if you are in genuine doubt by all means play for time. Remember that you have the right to say no. Although it is normally courteous to give a reason, even an invented one, you do not have excuse yourself every time you turn down a request.
MAKING THE BEST USE OF YOUR BEST TIME

The quality of time matters more than the quantity of time. You may feel that you know yourself fairly well but research suggests that most managers either cannot identify the hours when they are naturally more mentally alert or do not plan their time with this factor in mind. Therefore high quality time is often wasted on low quality activities.

WHAT IS YOUR BEST TIME?

Essentially it is the time when you do your best work. You can discover it by the process of experimentation. Maybe for you it is early in the morning, perhaps in the afternoon or late in the evening. For example, Winston Churchill used to work best late at night and in the early hours of the morning. By identifying the time when you do your best work, you can accomplish more with less effort if you programme important items at this high performance time.

PROCRASTINATION

Procrastination which comes from the Latin word ‘tomorrow’ has been described by Adair (1988) as one of the most common time problems. What is procrastination and how does it differ from delaying a decision until more time is available?

Procrastination can be defined as putting off something that should be done intentionally, habitually and reprehensibly. If you suspect that you are prone to procrastination always ask yourself- why am I putting this off?. If you can find no good reasons and don’t confuse reasons with excuses, then you are guilty of procrastination. If you are a procrastinator, then the following three techniques may prove useful.

1. DO IT NOW

2. SINGLE HANDLING

3. START TIMES

I DO IT NOW
Procrastination is solved by doing things in your area of procrastination. When you know where your weak areas are, then you need to concentrate on these, persevere and discipline yourself. Start on your next day back at work by doing something that you have been putting off. It may be a small or a large matter; a confrontation with a low performer; a meeting with your manager; or an unpleasant task you know you should address.

I can guarantee that on completion of such a task, you will experience a tremendous feeling of achievement.

2. SINGLE HANDLING

Single handling simply means that each piece of paper should be handled only once. It’s been called the million pound idea. Managers who have discovered and applied it have saved up to one hour a day or 220 hours a year. Don’t put down a letter or a memo that needs a response until you have fired off a reply. It is often easier to think of an answer when you have just read a letter and your reaction is fresh in your mind.

Another useful idea is to tear a corner off a piece of paper every time you handle it. If it gets to the stage when the paper has no corners left, this means that you have handled that piece of paper four times without taking action. In short you are procrastinating.

3. START TIMES

This is a very powerful philosophy for effective self-management. This means that you should schedule the start of work and not just the finish. This leads to better planning and personal organisation as well as keeping procrastination firmly under control.
DELEGATION

Delegation has a strategic importance in the art of time management. As ward sister and charge nurses you must question your willingness and ability to delegate effectively to others. True delegation implies entrusting to another person a job together with the authority to do it. This person should have the necessary competence for the job together with a willingness to accept it. You should retain a means of exercising overall control by checking performances and establishing reward times. When a member of your staff comes to you with a problem, ask for a solution.

Good delegation yields a double crop to the acre. It allows you to conserve time for the key functions of your job, that is the work that only you can do, and it also develops the abilities of your staff. Research in five European countries has unearthed the seven top reasons why Chief Executive Officers do not delegate. They include:

1. It’s risky
2. We enjoy doing things
3. We dare not sit and think
4. It’s a slow process
5. We like to be “on top of every thing”
6. Will our subordinates outstrip us
7. “Nobody can do it as good as me”

If you can identify with any or all of these reasons then perhaps you need to examine your willingness to delegate. According to Adair (1988) three factors should influence any decision to delegate:

1. CONFIDENCE IN STAFF

You are more likely to delegate if you can trust your staff. This involves making a judgment about their professional competence and personal qualities. This is not easy. It means spending time working with people, talking to them, observing their performance and reflecting on them until you form a sound judgment of how far you can delegate to them.
2. TIME AVAILABLE

As general principle, the more you share decisions the more time it takes. The vary time it takes to explain and check understanding of procedures, may not be your to give. At a time of crises when time is short (and where life and death may be involved), delegations of decisions is not advisable, although paradoxically, it is often then that having the capacity to delegate all but the most important activities can be most valuable.

3. IMPACT ON THE FUTURE

The increased demands on your time should compel you to set priorities and delegate. One manager, speaking of his system of delegation stated that he delegated “what ever is time consuming and not important”. The time / importance ratio is worth bearing in mind. As people in charge of wards you do not want to spend large chunks of time on the least important aspects of your job and very little time on the big issues. The natural items for delegation are therefore the more routine or administrative parts of your job. Always delegate an entire job rather than part of a job and make certain that the boring or repetitive work is not the only work that you delegate.

IDENTIFICATION OF SHORT AND LONG TERM GOALS

The management of time can never be seen in isolation from other activities. It is only one of the elements of an effect performance. The identification of short and long term goals is crucial to effective time management.

Clearly the first step is to sit back and ask yourself, “What are my goals and objectives for the next 6 to 12 months and how should my life and work be different in 2 to 5 years from what it is now?.

Recently a friend of mine returned from an interview for a senior nursing post. She had been a ward sister for a number of years and was regarded by her colleagues as a very capable practitioner. Reflecting on the interview she concluded that the most difficult question posed to her concerned her plans for the ward over the next 2 to 5 years and the steps she had taken to action this plan. For the first time this sister had realised that while she performed well on a day -to- day basis and was an excellent clinician, she never developed her helicopter vision, that is, the skills of taking a broader and longer look at the work she was doing. Her work was not set in a strategic context and she failed to identify key operational goals and objectives. She also failed to get the job!
Having established the importance of setting objectives, it is useful to check these objectives against the following criteria - are they clear, specific, measurable, realistic and time-bound. The need for objectives to be time bound can not be over emphasised. Firstly it avoids procrastination and secondly it prevents the application of Parkinson’s Law which states that “work expands to fill the time available for it”.

When you have set your objectives and established a time frame, the next step is to ensure that you review progress on a regular basis. The time interval for the review will largely depend on the nature of the objective for example; the introduction of computerised care planning will take longer than the introduction of bedside hand overs. In the case of limited success, try and identify the cause of failure and avoid repeating this mistake.