

Slave or Master of Your Time?

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I'm hearing 2 common themes from my executive clients:

1. "I am tied up all day long in back-to-back meetings. The only time I have to do the work that comes out of those meetings is in the evening, or in the wee hours of the morning before others start their day."
2. "I'm always running late. Each meeting goes over, and I end up feeling harried and apologetic for keeping people waiting. I'm always running to catch up!"

What I notice in these conversations is the hopelessness and resignation with which these stories are told to me. And, if it felt like an easy fix, these high-level, experienced executives would have taken care of it already. That said, I do think there are a few incremental shifts that can make a world of difference in how you feel about who's in charge of your calendar. Here are some approaches that have worked well for others. Read them over to see if any or all might serve you as you work to become master of your destiny, or, at least, of your calendar.

Suggestion #1:

Block a chunk of time for work during your workday

Rather than creating an endless list of "to dos" with no time allocated to actually get them "ta done!" – complete those action items during the time you have regularly scheduled for your own work. This will likely require you to cut back on the amount of time you spend in meetings. Start by declining meetings in which your attendance is a "nice to have".

Suggestion #2:

For meetings that you convene, build in time to transition to the next event. Then, stick to only the amount of content that can be covered in that timeframe. If you're a participant in a meeting, let the leader know upfront that you'll need to excuse yourself a few minutes early to get to your next appointment on time. When I coach leaders to improve their communication effectiveness, it is common to find that one of the issues is the failure to take the 5 minutes before a meeting to think through their desired outcomes and strategic questions. By building in the buffer, you can arrive at each meeting ready to be present and highly effective, and you'll avoid being

chronically late. You'll also have a chance to address fundamentals like grabbing a glass of water, or going to the bathroom.

Suggestion #3:

Align with your Executive Assistant

The clients that are most successful at mastering their calendars invest the necessary time with their Executive Assistants to regularly review strategic priorities, stakeholders and meetings. They have brief and efficient 1:1s on a weekly basis to look at the short and mid-term and discuss calendar implications. Their EAs know what to hold sacred on the calendar, which projects and people take precedent over the rest, and to ensure their executives have time to think, breathe and eat every day.

The reality for most of us is that we'll always have too much to do and too many demands on our time. No one can fix the problem for us. We need to shift our approach, and design our workdays to best reflect our strategic priorities. Those priorities need to include time with family, time alone and time to work on what will make the biggest contribution to our teams and organizations.

Choose to become the master of your calendar and start saying no more often to those people and activities that don't align with where you want to go. Small shifts in how you manage your time can make a world of difference in the long run.