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MASTERING TIME

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mastering time

the
new
leadership
imperative

Changing your perception of time from a management problem to a leadership opportunity can dramatically boost productivity.

By John Clemens and Scott Dalrymple

What determines whether you are a slave to time or are its master?

How do you get this “devourer of things,” as the Roman poet Ovid so aptly put it, on your side? What new tools do you need to transform time into a powerful leadership asset instead of a liability? How do you leverage time, packing more leadership into each minute of the day?

These and other questions began to nag at us after a client casually wondered, “Do you do anything on time management?” Our answer was a quick “no.” After all, across the world, dozens of time-management seminars routinely attract thousands of eager acolytes. Books such as *How to Get Control of Time and Your Life* by Alan Lakein (David McKay Company, Inc., 1973) have become classics of the genre, urging readers to delegate, streamline, hurry up, and get organized. This was an idea, it seemed, whose time had come—and passed.

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What's more, we recently had read personal-growth guru Stephen Covey's revealing critique of conventional time management. It "strains relationships," he wrote, "rather than building them, limits vision, and causes people to become rigid and inflexible."

Yet surely, we thought, time itself must be at the core of leadership in ways not yet recognized or studied. Observing the hundreds of executives we have worked with in the past 20 years—supremely effective women and men who run the world's largest associations and firms—we noticed something amazing: For them, time was a leadership opportunity, not a management problem.

These "time masters," as we began to call them, routinely seized the moment, accomplishing more in a day than 10 ordinary mortals. Yet they never seemed to be in a hurry. They had lots of meetings but did not live slavishly by their calendars. They didn't organize every minute. They seemed to sense, as St. Augustine put it, that "the world was 'made with time' and not 'in time.'" For them, time was an ally, not an enemy.

We concluded that time—and timing—are essential inputs that determine the success or failure of everything from organizational change efforts to breaking successfully into new markets. This uniquely human force—time mastery—also carries in its relentless DNA the power to drive radical change and transformation.

As we describe in our latest book, *Time Mastery: How Temporal Intelligence Will Make You a Stronger, More Effective Leader* (Amacom, 2005), the executives we studied not only conceptualized time quite differently than their less successful counterparts; they also practiced unique temporal behaviors that were fundamental to their leadership: expanding the temporal palette, building continuity, setting the organizational rhythm, and exploiting time's elasticity. Although we describe each of these behaviors here in discrete terms, keep in mind that they work

together in powerful and synergistic ways.

Expanding the Temporal Palette

We frequently ask executives we work with an unusual question: "Which is most important to you—the past, present, or future?" The typical answer is, "All three." If forced to choose, though, most people will say, "The future." The present is crucial, they point out, but true leaders must think about the future, create a compelling vision of that future, and lead people to it.

But in our experience, many leaders don't walk the talk. To prove it, we have developed a simple but powerful exercise to gauge the temporal orientation of leaders. We call it "VerbAudit." Participants write a short paragraph describing their organization.

Then the fun begins. Participants read their own paragraphs to themselves or perhaps swap with a partner. We then ask them to circle all of the verbs in their paragraphs and to categorize each verb as past, present, or future tense. When the categorization is complete, we ask them to count the number of past-, present-, and future-tense verbs they used in their paragraphs. The paragraphs usually aren't very polished, but that's why the exercise works: People are writing their top-of-mind thoughts, with little time for self-editing.

The results are revealing. VerbAudit nearly always shows an overwhelming preoccupation with the present. The typical result is 80 percent present-tense verbs, 15 percent past-tense, and just five percent future-tense.

Most managers clearly are trapped in the present, caught up in their organization's day-to-day problems. They didn't write about potential strategic alliances, eventual expansion, or truly long-range goals. They were managing the present, not leading it into the future.

Then we discovered a true time master, Lockheed Martin's Tom Burbage, who led the company's \$19 billion Joint

The lesson? Time masters bookend the present with the past and the future. They encourage their teams to value what has gone on before and to learn from history, and they paint vivid pictures of the future.

Strike Fighter (JSF) program. Concerned that morale might be flagging, he threw a party for hundreds of JSF team members. After dinner, he unveiled jumbo-sized mock-ups of business magazines and newspapers. Above the pictures of the new fighter, headlines proudly proclaimed "Lockheed's JSF Takes Off," "How Did They Do It?" and "Lockheed Stock at All-Time High." A closer look revealed that each was dated a full four years into the future.

The lesson? Time masters bookend the present with the past and the future. They encourage their teams to value what has gone on before and to learn from history, and they paint vivid pictures of the future that inspire and motivate their team.

Building Continuity

Time masters—like most of us—live in the perpetual whitewater of turbulent schedules, caroming from one meeting to the next, their days filled with a hodgepodge of different roles—hosting a board dinner, taking a phone call, mentoring a colleague, communicating critical information, deciding who gets what. Their open office doors encourage people to poke their heads in when they feel like it; phones are casually answered in the midst of other tasks; priorities are continually juggled; time is compressed; decisions are high speed. Activities overlap, dovetail, and disrupt one another.

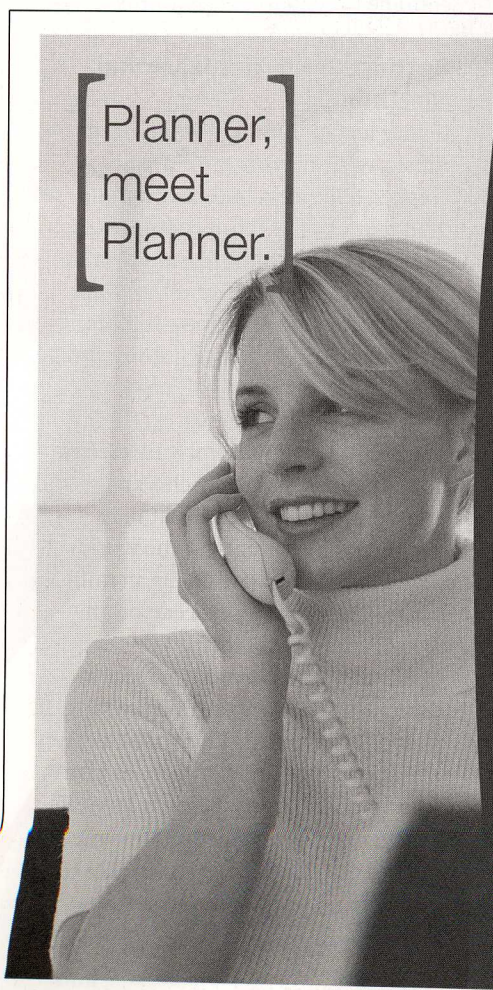
How do they survive this chaos? First, they don't slice and dice every minute of the day, filling each line of their calendars

with fragmented tasks and meetings. Their temporal realities are quite different than most people's. To them, leading is like making a movie rather than taking a snapshot. They imagine time as a continuous flow that leads to peak experiences—something that's best represented by the single, unending edge

of a Möbius strip, a loop whose twisted contours cause its back to transform itself into its front as its end inexplicably becomes its starting point.

Second, time masters go through the day making time when needed, joining diverse experiences into a meaningful pattern, creating order in a chaotic, fragmented world. They seek continuity, sensing that life—both personal and organizational—is a process, a series of gradual changes. Like all good narratives, it is not composed of short, episodic takes but instead is a progression of long tracking shots.

Finally, time masters don't believe in endings. They keep discussions going. They don't buy into the platitudes that insist that they must always "go for the close," set priorities, summarize action steps, assign responsibilities, finish. Instead, they build flow, creativity, ownership, and continuity. We have



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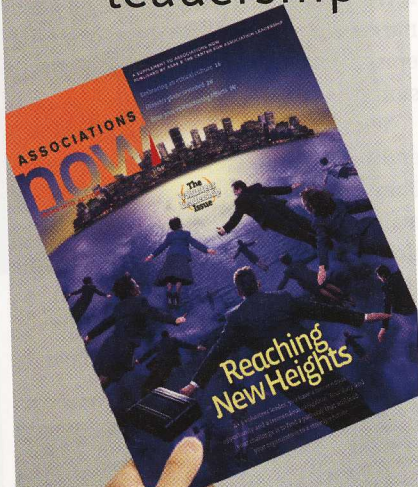
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Rhythm also plays a vital role in communication. Martin Luther King, Jr. and John F. Kennedy knew that a conversation's rhythmic properties give it meaning.

observed these phenomena so many times that we have given one of them a name: the "hallway double take," that sought-after but rarely achieved delayed reaction that means people are processing, absorbing, and beginning to get what just went on. They haven't closed their minds; they have opened them. They seem to live by Winston Churchill's maxim that "success is not final, failure is not fatal: It is the courage to continue that counts."

Setting the Organizational Rhythm

If your leadership style were set to music, what rhythm would it be? A spirited *allegro*? A laid-back *adagio*? An insistent march? Like a composer or conductor, time masters sense—and then set—the right rhythm for their organizations and their customers.

Fortunately, we've all got rhythm. It's one of the things that make us unique. Beat and cadence (in their musical and nonmusical forms) energize any occasion in which passion and enthusiasm play a role. That may explain why, throughout the world, millions of dollars are spent on military bands. The right rhythm can be an important survival tool.

Rhythm also plays a vital role in communication. Martin Luther King, Jr. and John F. Kennedy knew that a conversation's rhythmic properties give it meaning. At a more intimate level, listen to two people talking. You will notice that each seems to be able to predict what's coming next in the stream of speech. Fascinating research done in 1988 on conversation partici-

pants at the University of Pennsylvania has revealed that the syllables participants stress fall into a sort of shared rhythm—that is, people engaged in conversation adapt and modulate the metrical patterns of their own speech to match and complement that of those around them.

When leaders and their followers catch the same rhythm, organizational performance improves. Take the super-successful Spanish-based apparel manufacturer Zara, recently profiled in *New Yorker* magazine. In an industry known for its dirgelike market response (most of Zara's glacially slow competitors ship only once a season), this trendy upstart has created "fashion on demand." It delivers twice a week from its mammoth warehouse to more than 1,000 retail outlets in 33 countries, from Japan to Venezuela. CEO José María Castellano Ríos, who compares the shelf life of a new dress to a tub of yogurt, has perfectly caught the rhythm of Zara's customers. Result? His time mastery has transformed his organization into world-class.

Exploiting Time's Elasticity

At our time-mastery seminars, we ask participants to turn over an old-fashioned, three-minute egg timer and watch the sand pass from the upper chamber to the lower. Everyone knows intuitively that sand must flow through the bottleneck at a constant rate. When the upper chamber is full, it seems that the amount of sand in it decreases at a slow, steady rate. But when it is about half-empty, we perceive that the speed of the emptying



Whether speeding up, slowing down, or stopping, time masters understand that clock time, although an important time-management tool, contributes little to time mastery.

sand increases. When it is almost empty, the flow seems to increase exponentially. Now time, which seemed so languid before, races ahead.

One of us recently noticed this disarming Alice in Wonderland-style effect while making a presentation to a large audience of executives. The host had emphasized the importance of ending the presentation precisely at noon, so participants could proceed to lunch. A small clock was installed on the podium. We had seven major points to cover, each embellished with short film clips and PowerPoint slides. Time moved surprisingly slowly as the first four topics were covered; the hands of the clock seemed barely to move. But as the fifth point was covered, the clock seemed to speed up, going faster and faster. In the middle of the sixth point, the clock suddenly read five minutes before noon. The final five minutes raced by as if they were seconds. Not surprisingly, the presentation ended abruptly, with no time to cover the final point.

Time, it seemed, had melted away. The length of a minute, an hour, or a day, is—as Albert Einstein asserted—relative: “When a man sits with a pretty girl for an hour, it seems like a minute. But let him sit on a hot stove for a minute, and it’s longer than any hour.” Thus does the father of relativity challenge those tens of thousands of time managers who continue—no doubt unwittingly—to subscribe to Isaac Newton’s 17th-century postulate of a clockwork universe. Einstein taught us that there is no universal

time scale that is the same for all observers.

Time masters agree that time is not a constant. They see time as malleable, something they can shape and mold. Financial services giant Goldman Sachs seemed to sense this plastic dimension of time when it ran a full-page ad in the world’s financial press. The copy read, “You’re on the accelerator. You’re on the brake. You’re looking behind. You’re thinking ahead. This is leading!”

Some leaders speed up time. Their mantra is “When?” Consider, for example, Mobil Oil Corporation’s Speedpass, the gizmo that gets drivers in and out of service stations as quickly as possible. Some, such as Liz Claiborne Chairman and CEO Paul Charron, exhort their teams to be less busy by asking, “Why?” He wants them to cherish what he calls “white space”—those rare hours free of the tyranny of any calendar, time in which they can slow down and think.

Meanwhile, other leaders—for instance, Simon Walker—seem to actually stop time. Walker creates extreme leadership-training events, such as crewing on a 72-foot yacht across the North Atlantic. “During a crisis,” he said in an interview, “my third command was always to put on the kettle. If the skipper wants a cup of tea, it can’t be that bad.”

Whether speeding up, slowing down, or stopping, time masters understand that clock time, although an important time-management tool, contributes little to time mastery. They would agree with William Faulkner,

who wrote in *The Sound and the Fury* (Vintage, 1987 reissue), “Time is dead as long as it is being checked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life.”

Your Temporal Future

Five years of research, much of it gleaned from the narratives of organizational leaders, has convinced us that time’s time has come, that enhancing your temporal intelligence can significantly improve your effectiveness. It is as important to leadership success as the long-heralded behaviors of empowering others, setting examples, listening, initiating change, and creating shared visions.

Whether it is a fresh sense of how a team’s rhythm can be discerned and then altered, or how turning discontinuity into continuity can create peak experiences, or how painting a clear picture of the future improves present performance, time’s fascinating intersection with almost everything that leaders do is ubiquitous and exciting. **an**

*An author of several leadership books and many articles, John Clemens is a professor of management at Hartwick College and founder of the Hartwick Humanities in Management Institute in Oneonta, New York (www.hartwickinstitute.org). With Scott Dalrymple, an assistant professor of management at Hartwick College, he coauthored *Time Mastery: How Temporal Intelligence Will Make You a Stronger, More Effective Leader* (Amacom, 2005). E-mail: clemensj@hartwick.edu*