April 2006 - Issue #2

In this issue:

- Would you like to add an extra hour to every day?
- Lisa's Tips - April's Topic - Project Management
- Recommended Reading

Would you like to add an extra hour to every day?

According to a sampling of business executives and managers, organization/ time management is emerging as one of the most critical issues in the workplace. As organizations struggle to achieve profit goals and remain competitive, employees tend to take on more roles, work longer hours, etc. Even though I'm known for organization (my grade school teacher told my Mom that she knew I'd be "organizing other people's lives some day" - I wonder if my Mom knew how to take that comment about her 10 year old), it's easy to get caught in this trap.

Does it sound familiar that the last time you were "caught up" with your workload was so long ago that it is a distant memory?

So, how do you gain an hour a day? Simplicity and focus.

First, a simple to-do list can achieve wonders. It doesn't require software, fancy forms, a PDA, etc. Keep a list of all the things you need to accomplish. As you think of items, add them to the list, and as you complete items, cross them off the list. If the items do not need to be completed until a future time, put them on a list for that month and file it away for now. These lists allow you to see your workload at a glance and receive immediate feedback (a good sense of accomplishment) as you cross items off the list. And, most importantly, they "work".

Second, you have to spend time to free up time. As counterintuitive as that sounds, it has proven true. I heard more times than I can count that managers do not have the time to meet with their employees. However, I found that if you spend the time up front on a regular basis (such as every 90 days at a minimum) to sit down with your employees and discuss past performance, future goals, and potential roadblocks, more than one hour a day of time is freed up over the long term. Employees need to fully understand their goals, how/ why those goals are providing value for the company, how they should prioritize their workload, etc. It is interesting that as this is implemented, you gradually see your employees feeling empowered to make decisions within their guidelines, asking better questions and becoming more productive and enjoying their day more. Not a bad side benefit!

Third, prioritization combined with follow up is key. Although follow-up is important, following up on the priority tasks is what achieves success. Follow-up only on your "A" and "B" tasks on your to-do list (put your "C" tasks on a separate list or on the bottom of your list for "when there is extra time available"). When prioritizing, a simple system works effectively. Think about the result the task will achieve and what that will achieve for your company or for you. If it's important, put it on the top of your to-do list and if it isn't, put it at the bottom. Then, work the to-do list in order and follow-up with your employees on the critical tasks only (what you follow-up on will be perceived as what is valued). Provide yourself with a reward as you complete critical tasks. (It can be as easy as walking to the cafeteria for a soda, taking time to call your family, etc).

Start slow. Implement one technique consistently for a period of time so that it has a chance to yield results. Soon, you'll have an hour more a day. It requires no money or complicated systems - only simplicity and tenacity.

Lisa's Tips - April's Topic - Project Management

1. Form a team: Although this seems obvious, it is rarely achieved. The definition of a team is a group of people working together with a common goal. If one person on a team can succeed while the others fail, it is not a team.

2. Estimate the time to complete tasks aggressively: This might seem counterintuitive to those that want to make sure they are successful (accomplish tasks on time). However, for example, if you have 30 tasks and every person adds a cushion to their task time, is it possible the project could take 4 or 10 times longer than it should? Sure. And, if you have 5 days to complete a task that could be completed in 1 day, does the extra time yield better results? No. I've found that people usually start working on the task on day 4. Instead, it is important to make reasonable estimates of time and stick to them. Why is this important to larger topics such as profit/competitiveness? As an example, let's assume that you are on a project team to reduce lead-time to customers from 10 days to 5 days, and that your competition delivers in 6 days. Do you think it will make a difference if this project is completed in 3 months vs. a year?

3. Critical path: It is easy to get buried in the details of a million tasks within a project plan. Instead, find out which tasks are on the critical path (they must be completed before another task can begin and it is a task that is required for the project to be considered a success). Typically, it will be a small fraction of the total tasks. Then, as a project leader, focus and follow up on only those tasks.

4. Celebrate "small wins": Don't wait for the end of the project. Celebrate successes along the way, especially those on the critical path. This will help keep the team focused and working as a team.

Recommended Reading

Good to Great by Jim Collins - it is an interesting read on how any company can become "great" (achieve sustainable performance) and what the critical factors are in companies who have gone from "good" to "great". The results of the study were interesting and a bit radical from "common" organizational thinking. It all starts with people - leadership. However, the findings show that it isn't the dazzling, celebrity leaders that Boards typically choose that build great companies; it is the often-overlooked "Level 5 leaders".

LMA Consulting Group
2058 N. Mills Ave, PMB 532
Claremont, CA 91711
Main: 909-630-3943
Fax: 909-625-5603
www.lma-consultinggroup.com
landerson@lma-consultinggroup.com