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Working with other people

> People seem to want to follow the beaten path. The difficulty is that the beaten path doesn't seem to lead anywhere.
>
> *Charles M Mathias Jnr*

You will encounter people of all sorts in business. Some you will get on with, some you will not; some will help you, inform you, or teach you; some will infuriate you; some you will work with, getting things done that would not happen otherwise. But, male or female, young or old, senior or junior – all will waste your time. Some will do so intentionally, others unwittingly, but it will happen.

What is more, because people interactions in business are vital, there is no way of avoiding them, but you have to work with people in a way that anticipates and minimises the disruptive effect they can have on your time. Here we look at a range of topics, useful in themselves, and as examples of the approach to take, that help. Some will be most appropriate if you manage other people, others are more generally applicable; all will save you time.

Let us look at general people issues first. The intention here is to give the feel of a whole range of 'people issues' that can

affect the utilisation of time either positively or negatively; and which can often do so to a considerable extent.

The socialising organisation

An organisation is a club. Colleagues are acquaintances or friends and work can be fun (not all the time perhaps, but it is a relevant objective), and this makes for problems as, for example, 'Good morning' turns into half the morning disappearing in chatter. It is an area where a time log may provide surprising information.

Now I am not suggesting that all social contact is forbidden, perish the thought. I like a chat as much as anyone; indeed, without some of this to foster relationships, an organisation would not only be duller, but a less effective place. There is an indefinable dividing line between the social chat and the business content, and curtailing anything we cannot definitely label 'business' will risk throwing the baby out with the bath water. On the other hand, you do need to keep things in proportion, curtail excesses and beware those moments when the danger is greatest – time will be really wasted. These include:

- first thing in the morning, when greetings tend to turn into an in-depth analysis of the meal, date, TV or movie, sporting event or disaster of the previous evening;
- breaks, when the coffee comes round or people gather around the drinks machine;
- lunch, when even the process of discussing when to go, with whom, and where, assumes time-consuming proportions;
- the end of the day when everyone is getting tired and a chat is a welcome excuse to wind down early.

There are places too where you are prone to get caught and conversation runs on. In some companies, Reception acts as a sort of plaza with people coming and going through it in different directions using their meeting as an excuse for a chat.

Because people's work patterns are different, moments when you have time for a chat may not suit others and vice versa. There needs to be mutual respect for people's time and concentration around an office, and everyone can play a part in fostering such a culture. For example, an earlier section advocated taking an occasional break to aid concentration. Do not, however, use these to break in on other people. Not only does this waste their time, but what you intended to be a two-minute pause may very easily turn into half an hour, two cups of coffee and, even if some of the conversation is useful, a major disruption of two people's schedules. So beware and be careful – there is no need to be stand-offish or to screen out useful conversations, but remember that this is a major factor eating away at productivity, and act accordingly.

Informal contact

You do need to see and talk to people. But, like so much else, how and when this is organised should be a conscious plan, one conditioned not least by the time that will be taken up. How do you approach this? This has become a technique in its own right, with its own abbreviation: MBWA. These initials stand for 'management by walking about', and it describes the need for management, perhaps especially senior management, to keep in touch at a direct and personal level with the other departments and people with whom they work. However good the management control systems in an organisation, there is no substitute for going and seeing and hearing for yourself what is going on, and what problems and opportunities exist.

Management can very often become protected and cloistered to the point that they have no genuine feel for how other parts of the organisation work. So not only is this sound advice, but it is a real aid to communication, and it can save time. At its most dramatic, one fact-finding walkabout can negate the need for several meetings and a report as the evidence of your own eyes and ears jumps you ahead in the decision-making process. Being in touch makes a real difference to your ability to operate, so the balance of time here – taken and saved – is likely to be productive. This is especially true if you can find ways of creating opportunities for this that serve more than one purpose.

I was given a good example of this recently when I was conducting a short course for a client company. The Managing Director both introduced the programme and came back to round things off at the end. This is, I believe, good practice, demonstrating a senior management commitment to what others are being asked to give up time for and generally supporting a training culture. At the end of the second day, drinks were available and at one moment as everyone was chatting, the Managing Director interrupted his discussion with one of his people to make notes – they had stumbled on a useful point and he noted it for later follow up. This happened quite naturally as the chat mixed with more serious comment.

The point here was that the Managing Director, doubtless a busy man, consciously saw such a gathering as serving a double purpose: he was happy to support training, but more ready to do so if it provided an opportunity for some of the 'walking about' he felt was necessary anyway. He might have considered that giving just an introduction was not time well spent, but the addition of drinks and discussion – in fact taking longer – made it serve two purposes and become well worthwhile. Interesting.

Making a working lunch work

An army, it is said, marches on its stomach. In business too, we all have to pause now and then to refuel. What has this to do with time management? Consider the following phrases. First, 'business lunch'. For most people this conjures up something expensive, lengthy, and substantial. If you add in the time taken to get to such an event, then the total time involved is something to be considered very carefully. You need to think about whether to accept such invitations, or how often to do so. You may need to meet with the person concerned, but there may be other ways to achieve this. And you certainly need to think twice before you issue such invitations yourself. Again, the first question is whether a meeting is necessary, then whether it needs to be at lunch. Entertaining is, without a doubt, important. Some contacts (customers, suppliers and others) will not rate the business relationship so highly if you appear to take it for granted. Yet time is finite and you cannot do this every time you think of it. Each occasion should result from a considered decision and be worthwhile in its own right. Also consider simpler options. A meal out in a good restaurant or hotel may be too time-consuming for your contact (they are in all probability busy people too). What simpler options are there? Something in the office perhaps? It must be done well, but it does not need to be a gigantic meal or a time-consuming occasion to meet its objectives. You may well find this option is welcomed by some of your contacts.

Second, 'working lunch'. This is more often internal, and can be very simple – an urgent meeting scheduled for an appropriate hour with just coffee and sandwiches provided makes for productivity. Similarly, you may opt to go out for a simple snack with a colleague and do so to discuss a particular matter, often one that has previously escaped fitting into your schedule. All this is useful. Sometimes lunchtime needs to be something of a pause, but remember with around 220 working

days in the year, an hour for lunch on each would add up to more than 25 working days! So, it is certainly an area to think about extremely carefully. A final, cautionary, note: watch what you drink at lunchtime. Alcohol may help relaxation but falling asleep at your desk later will certainly not improve productivity!

Consider a day out

Entertaining was just referred to, but it can take many forms and some of them are a good deal more time-consuming than lunch. Corporate entertaining (and I am not thinking so much of major group occasions such as sponsorship events) can include a wide variety of things from a night at the opera, to an evening in a karaoke bar; from a day at the races to a golf afternoon. Because they involve a very real cost, such things certainly need thinking about, but so too do the time considerations.

Take a golf outing as an example. Much business may really be conducted on the golf course, and I am not suggesting that such activity is never useful and should be entirely rejected, but its real merits do need assessing. It is not enough that you or your contact will enjoy whatever it is. Ask:

- What will come of it?
- Will it genuinely move the relationship forward?
- Is there another way of achieving the same effect with less time expenditure?
- Can anyone else do it?

All these questions need answering. Other factors come in here too. A golf outing on a Saturday morning, rather than on a weekday, may make good use of time, though too many may begin to eat into family time. If three contacts accompany you

one day, then the time may be viewed differently from when there is only one.

Like so much discussed in this book, one more golf outing does not seem vastly significant, but it adds up. Two golf outings a month might use up the equivalent of a whole day, 5 per cent of your working time. You need to keep this in mind. Maybe a larger group of people once a month would work equally well. Whatever things of this nature form part of your working life, think about them not as an automatic part of the way things are – unchangeable – but as time that needs to be utilised carefully just like any other. Then you can make the right decisions and know that time is not being wasted.

However and wherever contact occurs with other people, the nature of it will affect the duration of it. Being aware of this, especially in terms of the negative aspects of contact – and avoiding it – will save time.

No conflict – no wasted time

Now listen, pay attention. It is no good just sitting there lazily scanning the pages, you have to read this properly and… Not a good start. Sometimes an approach that is designed to get straight to the point and therefore not waste time has the reverse effect. It rubs people up the wrong way, and can produce misunderstanding, dissent or argument that in turn take time to resolve and the original intention goes out the window. Conflict is not, in fact, entirely bad. It can act as a catalyst to debate, it can help promote creativity and prompt a drive for the results necessary in business. But there is a real difference between this and allowing unnecessary conflict to disrupt the smooth running of things and your time being affected along with it. I am not suggesting here that the wrong decisions should be made for the sake of a quiet life, but in a number of areas, conflict is to be avoided, for example:

- In communications. It may be necessary to persuade rather than cajole, and time taken to do so successfully may pay dividends.
- Office politics (of which there is always some) can become intrusive and time-consuming; though ignoring it is dangerous in other ways, it must be kept in its place.
- Personalities can become more important than issues; commercial reason must dictate most of what directs an organisation, and untangling personality factors once they have got out of hand takes time.
- Sectional interests also have to be watched.

Take this last as a simple example. Imagine that some internal reorganisation is to change the physical layout of an office – departments are going to move and, not surprisingly, sections are worried about the priority they will be given and the new conditions they will find. Yet, there are entirely practical issues too. The design department needs good lighting, the customer services department needs the most telephones, a department with large amounts of stock in and out may need to be on the ground floor, to take some very general ones. If consideration of what will be decided, any discussions, meetings and everything to do with the process, can be kept primarily on a practical basis (there are other issues, of course); if conflict, in this case about personal issues, can be avoided, the time taken to sort the whole thing out will almost certainly be less. This has wide implications, but shows the merit of always bearing in mind the time element of everything you touch.

Circumstances that can create time wasting because of conflict can be momentary, something only demanding a moment's thought to avoid, or more intractable, demanding real effort and willpower to avoid when you are itching to draw up battle lines. In either case, you should be on the lookout for such circumstances and act to avoid their worst effects.

Next, a number of points are investigated predominantly for those who, as managers, have other people reporting to them. Many of the points made will have relevance to others on the receiving end of such a relationship, or whose job is likely to include such responsibilities at some time in the future.

The right people

The logical starting point is perhaps when such relationships are created. Finding the right person for any job is a vital and complex business, one too often underestimated. There are many considerations, certainly too many for this book to explore comprehensively, but of one thing you can be sure: recruiting the wrong people is going to waste time. It means:

- performance being adversely affected;
- time taken up trying to correct the situation, and ultimately in discipline proceedings (and anything that touches on employment legislation is always time-consuming);
- replacing an inappropriate staff member;
- plugging gaps while all this is going on.

Recruiting and selecting takes time, but it is time well spent (and a topic you may want to investigate separately). Maybe, also, you want to select people who are themselves good at managing time. This can certainly enhance the strength of any team you manage. Anyway, leaving the details of recruitment and selection aside, with the people in place then you can consider what aspects of management are linked most closely to time management. One such is a key aspect of communication.

The need for clear instructions

There is an old saying that there is never time to do anything properly, but there must always be time to do it again. Nothing is more likely to end up being redone than not making it clear to people what they had to do in the first place. It has already been said here that communication is not easy, but the responsibility for getting it right is with the communicator – and that, if you are issuing instructions, is you. Similarly, if people do not really understand and fail to query it, perhaps because they are worried you will blame them, then that is also your fault because you should make it clear that in such circumstances it is the way they should proceed. So, instructions should be clear and people should be told:

- what needs to be done (and be given sufficient details);
- why it needs to be done (knowing the objectives may make the task clearer and will improve the motivation);
- how it should be done (methodology etc);
- when it should be completed (and anything else about the timing).

Before leaving the point, ask if it is clear – get some feedback. Any shortcut of this sequence must be based on genuine knowledge or familiarity, not simply assumption that all will be well. Good clear instructions save time, written guidelines do the same and for some jobs they are useful. This last is especially true of awkward or difficult jobs that are performed regularly but not often. One such job in my office is changing the printer's toner. It is not that complicated, but frankly it is difficult to do after the time gap usually involved without reference to a chart of diagrams that came with the machine and that shows clearly the sequence of actions needed to complete the task. The moment taken to get this chart out is tiny, much less than even minor pause for puzzlement about how to make the change without it, and it is all too easy with such a

task to get in a real muddle and waste a considerable amount of time. Moral: all instructions, in whatever form, must be clear.

Don't do it – delegate

If a task simply has to be done, but you cannot get to it, then the best way to give yourself more time is to delegate it to someone else. This is eminently desirable and yet, for some, curiously difficult. What are the pros and cons?

First, the advantages. Consider these by asking yourself what sort of manager you want to work for yourself. You could probably list a great many qualities: someone who is fair, who listens, who is decisive, good at their job and so on – but I would bet you put someone who delegates high on the list. The opposite is a boss who hangs on to everything, does not involve you, is probably secretive and generally not the sort of person you would want to work for at all. So, if you delegate effectively, there are major advantages in other ways: motivation and the chance to tackle new things for one, as well as the time you will save.

Second, the difficulties. Delegating is a risk. Something may go wrong and what is more, as the manager, you may be blamed. So, despite the fact that going about it the right way will minimise the risk, there is temptation to hang on to things. This makes for problems in two ways. You have too much to do, and particularly too much at the more routine end, keeping you from giving the attention you know they deserve to things that are clear priorities. And staff do not like it, so motivation – and productivity on the things they are doing – will also be adversely affected.

But there is another important and significant reason why delegation sometimes does not happen. This is fear – not that the other person will not be able to cope, but that they will

cope too well, that they will improve the method, that they will do things more quickly, more thoroughly and better in some way than you. If you are honest, you may admit this is a real fear too. Certainly, it is a common one. Though it is precisely how innovation can occur. It is not a reason that should put you off delegating – the potential rewards are too great. The amount you can do if you delegate successfully is way beyond the improvement in productivity you can hope to achieve in any other way. So, it is a vital area. But what about something delegated that does go better? So much to the good, this is one of the key ways that progress is made in organisations as new people, new ways, and new thinking are brought to bear on tasks. Without it, organisations would become stultified and unable to cope with change. And besides, as manager you should be the reason they are able to make this happen. It is your selection, development, counselling and management that create and maintain a strong and effective team; and this is something for which you deserve credit.

Making delegation successful needs a considered and systematic approach to the process. What does successful delegation achieve? There are several key results. Delegation:

- creates, for those to whom matters are delegated, opportunity for development and accelerated experience;
- builds morale (precisely because of the opportunity above) through the motivational effect of greater job satisfaction, and achievement long and short term in the job (and ultimately beyond it);
- has broader motivational effects around a team, as well as on the individual;
- for the delegator, concentrates time and effort on those aspects of their job that are key to the achievement of objectives;
- brings a more considered, or creative, approach to bear, uncluttered by matters that may distract or prevent a broad brush or longer-term perspective.

You can probably think of specific advantages springing from these kinds of general effects in your own job. Yet, it can be curiously difficult to delegate, and some managers find it impossible. Just as you want to want to report to someone who delegates, so to will those who work for you. If the time gains to be made from delegation seem inadequate to make you do it, or do it as much as you should, maybe this will produce additional pause for thought. Despite the several and considerable advantages delegation can bring, it is not without its risks. This element of risk makes it difficult to accomplish, but several factors can help:

1. **Minimising the risks.** There is always the possibility that delegation will not work. After all, it passes on 'the right to be wrong' as it were, by putting someone else in the driving seat. So, if a misjudgement is made about the choice of what is to be delegated, to whom it is to be delegated or how the process will be carried out, things may end up with mistakes being made, and time being wasted as a result. The net intention from all this must be to minimise the inherent risks, first by selecting tasks that are suitable for delegation. In most jobs there will be certain things that should sensibly be omitted. These include:
   - matters key to overall results generation or control;
   - staff discipline matters;
   - certain contentious issues (eg, staff grievances);
   - confidential matters (though be sure they need to be confidential; protecting unnecessary secrets can be very time wasting and often fruitless).

   Then, in picking the best person to whom to delegate, you should ask questions such as:
   - Have they undertaken similar tasks in the past?
   - Do they have the necessary knowledge, experience and capability?
   - Is it too much to cope with at once?
   - Is prior training (however informal) necessary?

- Do they want to do more? (Or should they?)
- Will they be acceptable to others involved and will it be accepted also as a fair opportunity amongst peers?

Thereafter, perhaps the greatest guarantee of success is clear communication, and that means more widely than just with the person involved. Others may have to know what is going on and have to trust in the person's ability to do something. Messages may need to be passed up and down and across the line to ensure total clarity. Make sure there is nothing left out regarding authority, responsibility and that, above all, the individual concerned knows why the job is necessary and why they are doing it. And, as the result of any briefing, be confident that they are able to do it satisfactorily.

Any explanation needs to make clear whether what is being done is a one-off exercise, perhaps in an emergency, or ultimately a permanent addition to the existing set of responsibilities. Remember, delegation is more than simple work allocation and, as such, can have implications for such matters as job descriptions, salary and employment conditions. Assuming that delegation is well chosen and communicated, the next step is to keep in touch, at least initially, with how things are going.

2. **Monitoring progress.** Once something has been passed over, keeping in touch can easily be forgotten, and when done can present certain problems. It must be done, in a word, carefully. If it is not, then it will smack of interference and may doom the whole process. The simplest way to monitor in an acceptable way is to build in any necessary checks at the time of the original briefing and handover. From the beginning, ask for interim reports at logical points. Do not simply arrive unannounced at someone's desk and ask to see the file (they may be at an awkward stage). Let them bring things to you, at prearranged moments. If they have been well briefed, know what is

expected and to what standards, then they can deliver in a way that either duplicates past practice, or brings something new to the activity. Either may be appropriate in the short term, though, as nothing lasts forever, new thinking is usually to be encouraged once the person has a real handle on the basics.

It may be necessary to let things proceed, to bite your tongue and resist taking the whole matter back during this stage as you see things proceeding in a way that may well differ, if only a little, from the way in which you would have done the job. The ultimate results make all this worthwhile, and not just in time terms but in terms of growth and development within the workplace. So far so good. If all goes well surely there is nothing more to be done? Wrong. The process must be evaluated.

3. **Evaluating how delegation has worked.** Once sufficient time has gone by and you can assess how things have gone, a number of questions should be asked. These can usefully include:
   - Has the task been completed satisfactorily?
   - Did it take an acceptable amount of time?
   - Does it indicate the person concerned could do more?
   - Are there other tasks that could be delegated along the same route?
   - What has been the effect on others (eg, are others wanting more responsibility)?
   - Is there any documentation change necessary as a result?
   - Has any new or revised methodology been created and are there implications arising from this (eg, a change to standing instructions)?
   - Overall, what has the effect been on productivity?

   This last brings us to a key aspect of evaluation: what has the effect been on you? In other words: what have you done with the time saved? (This might make new work possible,

or facilitate a greater focus on key or long-term issues.) There is little to be gained by delegating if you only end up submerged in more detail and having little or nothing of real substance to show for the change.

Similarly, should the process not be a success, questions should be asked about what went wrong and they too need to address both sides, asking not just what did someone do wrong or misunderstand, but also raising such questions as how thoroughly you in fact briefed that person. It is important to learn from the experience; testing what you delegate, to whom, and seeking the best way of handling the process, is well worthwhile. If you develop good habits in this area, it can pay dividends over time.

At the end of the day, the effect on others is as important as the effect on you. People carry out with the greatest enthusiasm and care those things for which they have responsibility. In delegating you pass on the opportunity for additional responsibility (strictly speaking, responsibility can only be taken, you cannot force it on people) and you must also pass on with it the authority to act. As has been said, delegation fosters a good working relationship around a team of people. Not least, it produces challenge and, although there are risks, people will normally strive hard to make it work and the failure rate will thus be low. Certainly, the effect on productivity can be marked. But – there is always a but with anything of this sort – it is a process that needs care, determination and perhaps even sacrifice. Delegation is not just a way of getting rid of the things you regard as chores, amongst the matters most likely to benefit from delegation are almost certainly things you enjoy doing.

The potential rewards cannot be overrated, and the need to make delegation work is therefore strong. Theodore Roosevelt once said: 'The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and the self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they

do it.' Sound advice, and for the manager wanting to be a good time manager it is crucial. The two things go together. You cannot be as good at time management if you are a poor delegator. Get both right and you have a major part of the overall management process working for you. This is an area to think on:

- Do you delegate?
- Do you delegate the right things and do it sufficiently often?
- How well does it work?

While the principles reviewed here are important and it is something to be tackled on the right basis, an intention and commitment to making it work are perhaps most important. It may be worth more time to check it out. If you think there is more that you could delegate, review just what and just how you can action the process to get the very most from it in terms of your time and all the other advantages that can flow from it. Perhaps you should consider attending a course on delegating (or better still, send your assistant!).

Swap tasks to save time

Everyone has different skills and different things they get done most quickly and easily. Some of the things you find laborious, a colleague may think a small matter. As everyone is in this position, all you need to do is organise some exchanges. For example, in the sales office of one of my clients, two people did this very effectively. The department had to analyse, document and circulate sales results in various forms (to show sales progress, salespeople's targets and results by territory etc). One person was very good at the analysis, sorting the untidy returns that came in from the sales team into an ordered set of information. The other was good at presenting the information in

graphic form – using software they knew backwards and others did not.

In the official work allocation, they had both been given the complete job to do for different product sales results. In effect, they swapped and all the analysis was done by one, while all the graphic representation was done by the other. The entire job was completed more easily and faster and there was more time to apply to other tasks, primarily dealing with customers, which made up their responsibilities. They felt it was a fair swap in time terms and all worked well.

This is something that can be done in all sorts of ways around groups of people working together, or even in different departments. There is only one snag to watch out for and that is any developmental role that is part of a job having been allocated to someone in the first place. If a manager expects you to become familiar with a task and build up some sort of expertise in it, then you are not likely to do that by letting someone else do the work. That apart, it works well as an idea and you may want to be on the lookout for suitable swap situations that will help you. They must turn out to be fairly balanced, of course – if one party ends up with far more work than the other, then the arrangement will falter, as someone will end up unhappy. More complex swaps, for example, two smaller tasks for one larger one, may achieve a suitable balance. Choose well and you may evolve a number of such arrangements all around the organisation, all saving you time. As long as the network does not become too complicated (it must continue to work when you are away for a while, and deadlines must be compatible) then it is one more useful way of saving time on a regular basis.

Develop your people

It was clear earlier, I hope, that delegation is one of the greatest opportunities for managers to create more time for themselves.

There is one potential snag, however, simply that the people to whom you delegate must have the necessary skill and aptitude to take on delegated tasks and make a good job of them. What their skill level actually is depends largely on you. You recruit and select them, and one of your responsibilities is helping them to develop.

Training and development is one of those things that most people agree is a 'good thing', yet it is also something that is all too easy to miss out when you are busy. Here is an additional reason to make sure that it does not get overlooked: help your people develop and they will help you do your job, because not only will the team perform better, but you will be able to delegate more to them.

As a responsible manager, you should have an individual development plan for every single person who reports to you. This will stem in part from their annual appraisal meeting and evaluation, and can usefully include: things that you will do, for example by personal counselling, and things they will do, such as private study and experiment and practice, and things that, as it were, the organisation will do for them, such as sending them on a course or providing other training resources for them to use.

The criteria that decide what development is necessary will arise from an analysis of a person's job, defining what is necessary to do it, then determining whether the person matches up to this or whether there is a skills gap that must be closed by training. In addition, the manager has to look ahead, asking how the job will be different in future because such changes may widen the training gap. Topics for training range wide (from the technical to personal skills), but they should also include a link with your job as manager and anticipate possible delegation opportunities.

What tasks must you cope with during the next year and what other things might you shed to make room for the new things you have to tackle? The obvious choices for matters to delegate are those that staff can already do competently. But it

may well be worth looking more broadly at what possibilities there are if some development is done first.

This can be a classic case of a positive balance: time investment is necessary, but the pay-off can often be well worthwhile. It is a pity if the longer-term nature of this process makes it less likely to be taken advantage of because, not only will you save time, but it will also lead to the other advantages of delegation: personal motivation and stimulation to the process of running the organisation.

Simply the most time-saving phrase in the language

There is a scene that is played out in offices all over the world and that must waste untold hours every single day. Imagine a manager is busy in his or her office when a head comes round the door and a member of staff comes in. 'What is it?' the manager asks. And the reply is something like: 'I am not sure how to handle such-and-such and wondered if you would just check it with me.' The manager thinks for a second. He or she is busy – in the middle of a job and not wanting to lose concentration – but has already been interrupted. So, his or her first thought is to minimise the interruption and get back to work fast. So, if the matter allows, the manager spends a minute or two explaining what to do and then tells the other person to let them get on, and the brief impromptu meeting ends. This may be done kindly or abruptly, the effect is much the same, and the one manager may play out the scene many times in a day.

But suppose the same manager is away from the office for a couple of days. In his or her absence, staff face similar situations. If the manager were in, they would go and ask. In the manager's absence, they simply get on with the job. When the manager returns what does he or she find? A chain of disasters?

A plethora of wrong decisions and misjudged actions? Rarely. The things the manager would have checked if he or she had been there have been actioned, and not only is no harm done, everything has probably gone perfectly well.

Think about it. I suspect this picture will ring bells with many, if not most, managers. Why does it happen? It is a classic case of thinking that it is quicker to do things for people, most often by providing the answer or making a decision. They take action, and life goes on. I believe this is wrong. You have to take a longer-term view, and this is where the most time-saving phrase in the language comes in.

Next time you are interrupted in the way I have described, try responding by saying: 'What do you think you should do?' They may not know, but you can press the point, prompt them to make some suggestions, and when they do, then ask which solution they think is best. This takes a few minutes, certainly longer than the earlier response, but if they are coping when you are not there to ask, then you will find that when you prompt them they most often come up with a good answer (in business there is rarely any one right way). Then you can say something like: 'That's fine', and away they go to carry on, leaving you to get back to your own work.

Now this is not just a better way of dealing with this situation. It is doing something else of very real value: it is teaching them not to interrupt, but rather to have the confidence to think it through for themselves. You have to be insistent about this. It will not work if you only make them think it through when you have more time, and still provide a quick answer when you are busy. Every time – every single time – someone comes through the door with a question about something with which you believe they should be able to deal unaided, you say: 'What do you think you should do?' It must become a catch-phrase. And as this practice continues, the message will get home to them, so that if they even start to think of asking you they can hear your likely response in their mind.

If you do this, you will find such questions coming less and less often. You will find that if they do ask, they move straight to the second stage, and come in with two or three thought-out options just wanting you to say which is best. Resist; ask them. The message will stick and, surprise, surprise, you will find you are saving time. What is more, your people will almost certainly get to like it more also, especially if you comment favourably on how well they are doing on the decisions they are making unaided.

This is one of the best-tested and useful time savers around – the most time-saving phrase in the language – and all it needs is some persistence and determination. Early on, you may think it is taking too much time, but the investment formula will surely pay off. There are considerable amounts of time to be saved here, linked in fact to the number of people who report to you. Do not be faint-hearted about this, it is very easy to break your resolve in a busy moment and send someone on this way with an instant dictated solution. Exceptions to your consistency will just make the lesson take longer to get over. But this idea really does work in the longer term. Not to operate this way does your people a disservice and allows you to miss out on one of the best time savers managers can find.

Do not hover

However work has been passed on, whether it is simple work allocation or a job that has been delegated, managers have to give members of their team space to complete the tasks they are working on. There is a temptation, perhaps particularly when a job is first delegated and you worry whether it will be done right, not only to check up but to do so on an ad hoc basis. Because this is off-putting to those who may be at some mid-point on a job – a point at which things are not finished

and look that way – it can actually end up delaying things and perhaps give you a false impression of their capabilities. These checks take time and may set back the way things are going rather than help. Certainly, they do nothing for motivation.

Do not hover. If something needs checking, and it may well do, then such checks should be discussed and agreed at the start of the work. Then the people concerned know what to expect. They can plan for any checks at particular moments and such checks will, as a result, be more likely to be constructive – or indeed unnecessary as those concerned will work to make sure that when the monitoring process arrives all is on schedule.

If you work to make such checks an agreed part of the plan, if you make them constructive, then you will not have to spend very much time on them at all. The team working well, with minimal supervision, is a great asset to any manager wanting to conserve his or her own time.

Motivate your people

Motivation is a powerful force. By acting on people's knowledge and ability, it can improve performance, efficiency and productivity – and save time. But, like so much else in management, this does not just happen. Unless you work at it, and that means some time will be taken up, you will not get the best from people, and that means some time will be wasted. Again, the equation of time here makes sense; the net effect should be a saving.

Motivation has been described as a climate and this is not a bad analogy. Just like the temperature in a room, many different things can affect people's motivation, and the effect can be for good or ill. There is sadly no magic formula for guaranteeing that motivation will be, and will stay, high. You

have to look at the motivational implications of things such as the administration and systems with which people work, the way they relate to colleagues and to you as supervisor, their feeling of security in the sense of knowing what they have to do and being part of a good team. All these can pull motivation down if they are organised badly or unsympathetically.

Whether it is time given to organising an incentive scheme or just saying 'Well done', it is time well spent. The details are beyond our brief here (and are looked at in detail in *How to Motivate People*), suffice it to say that a poorly motivated person will always take more time to manage than someone well motivated.

Provide specific time management help for staff

People who work together in an office can be infected by the prevailing practices and habits. In an office where some people habitually arrive late in the morning and nothing is said, more people will tend to follow suit and the situation will spread and get worse. This is a negative point, but here I am more concerned with the positive. If you want time management to be an issue that people care about, think about and work at, then you must take the initiative and lead by example. Several practices may be useful here, for example:

- Set up standard systems. It is not too dictatorial to set up, and insist on, certain systems that you feel will help everyone's time utilisation; for example, the same priority codes used around the office, the same basis for completing diaries (or even the same diary or time system), an insistence on tidy desks – you can probably think of more.
- Use standard reporting procedures. Here again a standard helps; such things as memo style, when, where and how

meetings are scheduled, notice boards, all can help create a climate of efficiency if they are well organised.
- Explain. If you tell people why you do certain things, work in certain ways and why you expect them to do likewise then it is more likely that, seeing good and personally useful reason, they will comply (you can go further and organise training for them).

With practice, habits follow and then the time saving around and amongst a group of people accumulates. So, be a public advocate for the virtues of time management, say you believe in it, say you practise it, and do not just expect your team to follow suit – make it easy for them by introducing them to the systems and laying down a few rules to make it all stick. If you help them in these kinds of ways, it will help you too.

Make and keep some firm rules

The days of dictatorial management have, by and large, long gone. Management in today's environment necessarily involves consultation. It makes sense. People will go along much more wholeheartedly with things – policies, practices, whatever – if they feel they have played some part in their origination. At its most powerful, this creates what is nowadays called ownership and is a force for commitment and getting results. But there are limits. Just because consultation is a good thing, it does not mean that you have to consult, interminably, over everything. To balance the time this takes, you need other areas where, while the policy is sensibly constituted, there is no debate and no time wasted on it. An example will perhaps help make this clear – see the text opposite.

Time-saving rules – a case study

Every office has administration and form-filling that needs to be done. It seems a chore but the information is no doubt useful in some way or should be! (Why else is it being completed?) Sometimes in an office, this form-filling is resisted. People know it is useful, but they also see other things as more important. They probably are, but that does not mean that the forms should never get filled in; besides, the individual contributions may, when collated, provide key information. So, what happens? People delay, forms come in late or incomplete and have to be returned and redone, sometimes more than once.

In one office, this was the case with the kind of control forms that field salespeople must complete to keep sales figures and the customer database updated. Salespeople are notoriously bad at administration and forms would regularly appear late, maybe half – and a different half – needing to be chased each month. The sales manager's secretary wasted time doing the chasing, and the sales manager had to keep explaining to his boss why the collated statistics were not available, as even one outstanding meant that the collation could not take place. It was generally messy and unsatisfactory and something had to be done to sharpen things up.

The sales manager thought about it. First, he checked that the system was the minimum necessary, and that the forms were straightforward to complete. He thought of various checks, but reckoned each could well waste still more time. Finally, he hit on the following scheme: he revised the instruction about the system so that no one was to be reimbursed their monthly expenses until all their forms were received and were passed as clear, legible and complete. Eureka! Overnight the behaviour was changed and all the forms arrived on time. What is more the effect lasted and I now know a number of companies who use the exact same incentive. The scheme was seen as reasonable and necessary, the new announcement of it was well put and the results spoke for themselves.

The most important thing happening here was that there was a group agreement that certain things simply had to go right without a lot of time being spent to achieve them. The incentive is neat, but

there might be numerous things a manager could do in such circumstances to add a bit of an edge to the rule.

The case study makes a good example, but the important thing is that there should be certain areas where you operate in this sort of way. There is a firm rule, possibly a sanction, and it is clearly understood that there will be no exceptions, no excuses and no time wasted. If something does go wrong having set up things on this basis, then you have to descend from a great height and read the riot act – and do so consistently.

Such rules provide major time saving. Have a think about the things that go on in your office and amongst your people. You may well have some candidate systems or procedures that are due this sort of treatment. If so, start working on them soon. It is additionally another area that can, in itself, not only save time, but also help to position attitudes and develop the right habits.

Meetings – danger or opportunity

It is said that the ideal meeting consists of two people – with one absent! And another saying (and the title of a training film) refers to meetings, bloody meetings. There is truth in both, yet meetings are an important part of organisational communication, consultation and debate. We need them. Or, certainly, we need some of them, but we must get the most from them, and we do not need too many, or those that are longer than necessary or, above all, those that are unconstructive. So, this is an important topic to relate to time management, and certainly a major potential cause of time waste. Let us be positive and consider what meetings can do in that light.

Whatever the meeting, large or small, formal or informal, long or short, if it is actively planned, considered and con-

ducted to make it go well, then it can be made to work. Meetings have various purposes: to inform, analyse and solve problems, discuss and exchange views, inspire and motivate, counsel and reconcile conflict, obtain opinion and feedback, persuade, train and develop, reinforce the status quo, impress and progress projects in a variety of ways.

You can no doubt expand the list. The key purpose is surely most often to prompt change (there is no point in having a meeting if everything remains the same), and this means making decisions. So any meeting has to be constructive. It must put people in a position where good decisions can prompt appropriate action.

Note also that good meetings are not just useful, they can also stimulate discussion and action that would never occur unless a particular group got together. What makes for a good meeting?

Setting up meetings

If a meeting is to be truly successful, then ensuring its success cannot begin only as the meeting starts – the 'I think we're all here, what shall we deal with first?' school of meeting organisation. Making it work starts before the meeting, sometimes some time before. First, ask some basic questions, for example:

- Is a meeting really necessary?
- Should it be a regular meeting? (Think very carefully about this one – once a meeting is designated as the weekly, monthly or whatever, it can become a routine that is difficult to break and as such can be an especially easy way to waste time.)
- Who should attend? (And who should not?)

If you are clear in these respects then you can proceed. Some key points to bear in mind include:

- **Setting an agenda.** This is very important; no meeting will go as well if you simply make up the content as you get under way (notify the agenda in advance and give good notice of contributions required from others).
- **Timing.** Set a start time *and* a finishing time, then you can judge the way it is to be conducted alongside the duration and even put some rough timings to individual items to be dealt with. Respect the timing too: start on time and try to stick with the duration planned.
- **Objective.** Always set a clear objective so that you can say *why* a meeting is being held (and the reason should never be – *because it is a month since the last one!*).
- **Prepare yourself.** Read all necessary papers, check all necessary details and think about how you will handle both your own contribution and the stimulation, and control, of others.
- **Insist others prepare also.** This may mean instilling habits (eg, pausing to go through something that should have been studied before the meeting, only shows that reading beforehand is not really necessary).
- **People.** Who should be there (or not) and what roles individuals should have.
- **Environment.** A meeting will go much more smoothly if people attending are comfortable and uninterrupted (so organise switching the coffee pot on and the phones off before you start).

Then, at the appointed hour, someone must take charge and make the meeting go well.

Leading a meeting

Even a simple meeting needs someone in the chair. That does *not* imply that whoever it is must be the most senior person present, do most of the talking or even lead the talking, or that

they need to be formally called 'chairperson' – but someone must *direct* the meeting. An effective chairperson can ensure a well-directed meeting and in turn means:

- The meeting will better focus on its objectives.
- Discussion can be kept more constructive.
- A thorough review can be assured before ad hoc decisions are taken.
- All sides of the argument or case can be reflected and balanced.
- Proceedings can be kept businesslike and less argumentative (even when dealing with contentious issues).

Thus, all the results of effective chairing are positive, and all allow a meeting to be succinct. To summarise, a good chairperson will lead the meeting, handle the discussion and act to see objectives are met, promptly, efficiently and effectively and without wasting time.

Some of what must be done is simple. Much is common sense; the whole of the role is important. Two simple but key rules that any chairperson must stick to (and which all present should respect) are: only one person may talk at a time and the chairperson decides who (when necessary).

Already all this begins to highlight the qualities of the person who will make a good 'chair'. It is always a vital role. They must command respect, ensure order and that the discussion moves purposefully towards its objectives. They must listen, summarise and, on occasion, pour oil on troubled waters. Effectively they are 'in charge', though this needs to be diplomatically achieved. Finally, consider two other important factors.

Getting off to a good start

The best meetings start well, continue well and end well. The chairperson should start the meeting in a way that:

- is positive;
- makes its purpose (and procedure) clear and seen to be businesslike;
- establishes the chairperson's authority and right to be in charge;
- creates the right atmosphere (whether to prompt creative thinking or, say, detailed analysis of figures);
- generates interest and enthusiasm for the topics (yes, even for a tedious regular review).

It usually helps if the chairperson involves others early on, rather than beginning with a lengthy monologue. This indicates a final point.

Prompting discussion

Of course, sometimes *prompting* contributions is the least of the problems, but you want contributions from everyone (or why are they there?). So, to ensure you get adequate and representative discussion and that subsequent decisions are made on all the appropriate facts you may need to prompt discussion.

Watch for specific reasons for silent participants. For example: they may fear rejection or pressure of other, more senior or more powerful, people, be unprepared, have an incomplete understanding of what has gone before or, indeed, may simply need encouragement. A good chairperson will ask for views and prompt open, considered comments.

Remember tone or manner can easily skew comments. For instance, someone senior is unlikely to encourage creative suggestions by fielding their own thoughts first: 'It is only a suggestion, but do bear in mind who's making it.' So, do not lead.

Questions make the best prompt: deployed to ensure you have the measure of different individuals, drawing in, say, the more reticent and acting to keep the overbearing or less businesslike in check. Questions must be unambiguous. *Open*

questions that cannot be answered 'yes' or 'no', questions starting what, why, where, when, how and similar or phrased: 'Tell me about…' or 'What do you think about…' work best. They get people talking rather than encouraging a monosyllabic reply that adds little. *Closed questions* are better when you want a short, specific response. Right?

In many organisations, meetings are unproductive or unconstructive not because how they are undertaken is ill-considered, but because making them successful is hardly considered at all. There is a real opportunity here (worth convening a meeting to discuss?). Time spent making sure that meetings do not waste time is time well spent. And careful planning, and attention to necessary detail, will make sure meetings go well and that is even more important. People are major time wasters; but they are also allies in creating productivity.