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Master Time Management

As a plumbing contractor, your business depends on your productivity, which is dependent on your time management skills. Here's how to master those skills.

by Alicia Garceau

Startling Statistics

Denise Landers, founder and CEO of Key Organization Systems Inc., a Houston-based company that helps businesses develop efficient systems to deal with daily workloads and cope with periods of rapid growth, shares these alarming time-management statistics:

- During the last 25 years, our leisure time has declined by 37 percent while our work week has increased by a full day.
- An average interruption during the work day consumes 10 to 20 minutes in getting back on track, not counting the actual time with the interrupter.
- Eighty percent of our interruptions usually come from 20 percent of the people with whom we work.
- Spending 10 to 15 minutes every morning mapping out your day can save up to six hours per week.

"The busiest people I know have nothing on their calendar," says Ellen Rohr president of Rogersville, Mo.-based Bare Bones Biz Inc. and former president of Benjamin Franklin Plumbing. Plumbers are no exception. In fact, because many plumbers juggle the role of business owner and field technician, time management is particularly challenging.

Schedule a Retreat

Before filling a calendar with to-do items, schedule just one appointment, says Rohr—a retreat where you work on a business plan and goals for the year ahead. The beginning months of the year, with the open calendar stretching out ahead, is an opportune time to hold a retreat.

During the retreat, ask yourself tough questions:

- What do you want from this company in terms of dollars?
- What type of lifestyle do you desire?
- What kind of work do you like to do?
- What makes you different and better from the competition?
- Who's your target market?

With the answers in mind, the second step of the retreat is to set about five goals for the year, such as, "I will hire two new service plumbers."

Time to Assess

Next, evaluate and record how you spend your business day. Be honest. How much time did you spend taking out the garbage? Are you answering the phones? Did you really spend six hours playing computer solitaire? "That's a pretty enlightening exercise," Rohr says.

Make a To-do List

After the candid assessment of how you spend your day, write a to-do list. Rohr jots her list down in a single subject, college-ruled spiral notebook. This master to-do list, as she calls the notebook, also offers a place to draw plans and brainstorm new ideas. "All you want is one place where you write everything," she says.

Plan for the Week

Now planning your week can begin. Each Sunday night or Monday morning before the workday starts, Rohr suggests holding a meeting where you are the only attendee. The meeting should last between 15 minutes and one hour. Use that time to look through your master to-do list, and compare it to your business plan and goals. Decide what to move to your calendar and what to delegate. Rohr prefers using Microsoft Outlook that she syncs with her PDA, but says that any planner works just as well. The key is that it's portable.

Rohr offers several tips for using your calendar. First, use only one calendar for business and personal life. "You should not separate your business from your personal life in anything. I don't believe there should be a separation. I think your business should serve your life. That's something that people lose track of. They'll miss their kids ballgame because that event is on the [calendar on the] refrigerator and they didn't notice, and they schedule a meeting with the big contractor," Rohr says.

When there is a project you need to tackle, schedule a two-hour block of time for it. "If you were going to give me eight hours to do a project, I'm only going to work for two of those eight hours," Rohr says. "I'm going to talk to you about how hard I'm working, go and make another pot of coffee, take a nap or even go for a walk, but I will only produce for two hours of that time."

When scheduling tasks, put like things together. "If you're going to be running around town doing errands, then block off three or four things that you've been meaning to do

that can all be accomplished in that kind of a trip," she says. Finally, leave some open space to handle the unplanned events that are bound to crop up.

Learn to Delegate

Delegation is a difficult concept for most small business owners, including plumbers. "A lot of them are entrepreneurial. They built their business from scratch. They want to be independent, but the tendency is they feel like they have to do everything themselves," says Gregory P. Smith, a motivational speaker, organizational development consultant and president of Conyers, Ga.-based Chart Your Course International. You can't be successful for very long if you can't delegate to other people in your company. Ego often gets in the way of productivity.

"There's this idea that nobody can do it just like them," Rohr says. Ask yourself, "Does this task really need me?" When delegating, Rohr has an employee shadow her as she performs a task. The employee observes and writes down the procedure. Rohr reports that when using this method, the employee typically performs the task 10 times better than she normally would.

Overcome Procrastination

Procrastinators are going to have difficulty achieving success if they continue to put off the most important tasks. The best way to overcome procrastination is to use an external system for accountability. Consultants or coaches are one option. "A good consultant will do two things," Rohr says. "One: hold up the mirror. They won't show you anything you don't know. And the other is to hold the owner accountable." Another possibility is pairing with another contractor with whom you don't compete and checking in once a week to share real financial and marketing information and report the progress you have made toward your goals.

You will know when things are working in terms of how you spend your time and energy if your statistics improve. Ask, "Am I making more money? Do I have more hours? How many of my kids' programs did I actually make?"

"These are statistics that you can measure," Rohr says. "One of the ways that you know that your efforts are helping is that you get more money and more life."