

***Leadership Lessons:  
Time Choices***

**Donald Thompson**

# Introduction

Leadership Lessons is a guide for professionals and individuals who are responsible for managing multiple priorities, and delivering results. Leadership Lessons is not a “silver bullet” to solve your time challenges but will provide you with valuable thoughts and perspective on how to develop positive behaviors, maximize your potential and obtain better results with less stress. In terms of meaningful learning outcomes, this eBook will help you to:

1. Upgrade your time management behaviors.
2. Identify and mitigate time wasters.
3. Communicate priorities and set boundaries for your time.
4. Retain more information through focus and note taking.
5. Manage meetings more efficiently.

***"Know the difference between what's important now, next and never."***

***-Donald Thompson***

# The Importance of Time Choices

Imagine this common scenario...

You arrive at work, turn on your computer and open your email. You start reading through each one top to bottom and find yourself experiencing the following reactions:

- This is not what we agreed to.
- This pisses me off.
- Why did you cc: my boss?
- Are you trying to make me look bad?
- I'm offended.
- I don't find this funny.
- Why are you filling my inbox with junk?

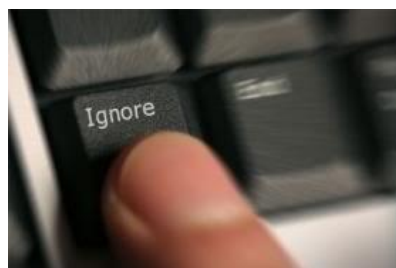


Did you then forward the email to someone? Did you call a friend to vent your frustration? Did you sit and sulk and let it affect the rest of your day? Did you avoid that person?

Big anxiety over small issues is a silent time killer. Having an emotional reaction to business content is not a good time choice and is distracting from your daily priorities. You have to have an “ignore” button and a “get mad later” button.

People who are poor with time management have ambiguous goals. When you clearly know what you want and need to accomplish, you know what to ignore. If you start your day having outlined your top three priorities, you can then determine what emails you start with, based on the subject line or sender, and which emails you may not even need to read.

Accomplishing the priorities which have been identified and agreed upon by you and your manager with pace and quality is likely to advance your career. Consider that many other items and conversations throughout your work day are time wasters.



# Prioritization Perspectives

Improving time choices requires a consistent commitment to reduce time wasters in your personal and professional life. By reflecting on how specific meetings, conversations, and tasks build your foundation for success, you will begin to raise your expectation for how your time is invested.

## **Time-Waster Mindset:**

- I spend more time than I should talking to coworkers or surfing the net.
- I sometimes attend meetings without having a meaningful contribution.
- I often find myself busy but not actually getting much done.

## **Productivity Concerns:**

- I complete tasks in order of assignment rather than priority.
- I do not communicate my priorities to my manager.
- I am often interrupted and find it difficult to accomplish my work.

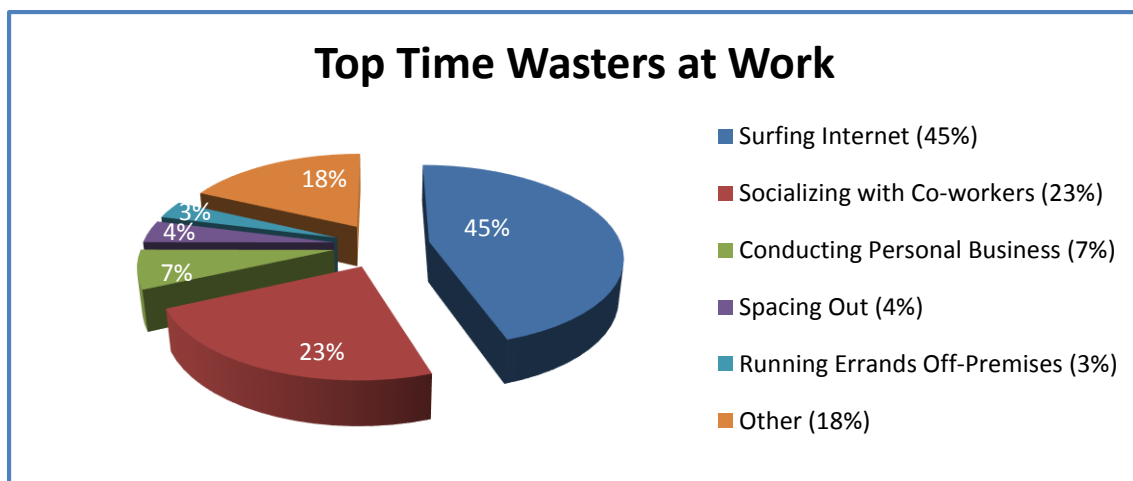
# Time Management

Time management is easy enough to grasp as a concept, but difficult to apply in reality. The theory is that you lay out a schedule and prioritize your tasks in a manner that will flow seamlessly through the day. Though that concept has sold a lot of books, planners and PDAs, the reason people still struggle with time management is that we are under the illusion that time can be managed. In reality, in order to improve our time choices, it is important to better understand the daily decisions we make. Time choices are crucial to establishing a pattern of excellence as it forces you to accept that you cannot manage what you do not control, and time is something you do not fully control.

Think of the people and circumstances that can impact your time: boss, co-workers, spouse, kids, traffic, weather, and more. When time is treated as a precious resource, you expect that the tasks you work on or the topics you discuss to build a foundation for results. Simply put, actions that limit your effectiveness should be considered time wasters.

## Time Wasters

Let's take a look at some facts that define how time wasting activities affect us in the workplace. America Online and Salary.com conducted a survey with over 10,000 respondents who reported wasting away about two hours of each workday (not including lunch). That's twice as much as most employers expect and over the course of a year adds up to almost \$800 billion in salaries spent on non-work related tasks.



The graph above clearly shows why the latest planner or traditional time management book will not solve your productivity issues. The simple truth is that any plan or planner will help only if blended with an upgrade in your time management behaviors. Remember, the majority of the time issues are within your control to address.

### **Mental Filters**

Let's think about some additional opportunities to make better time choices. Would you let another person go into your checking account and spend your money without asking? Probably not. Yet every day, we allow people to do this with our time. They ask for a minute and end up taking twenty minutes of our time and we allow the time waster occur. To help reduce this time waster in your daily routine, every conversation and meeting you have should run through mental filters.

The first mental filter you should consider is to determine how important the conversation or meeting is to your success. Most of us have an internal sense when a conversation or commitment is actually a time drain. The key is that we must reduce the number of these conversations by learning to say, "No." For example, a co-worker asks you to review a presentation that would force an interruption to your immediate tasks. Instead of automatically adding to your already overloaded plate, take a few minutes and determine the urgency of the task and what specifically within the presentation needs review.

The other mental filter you should run is whether the person that is interrupting you is coachable. If they are, then the interruption may be an opportunity to teach them and save you time over the long term. As another example, if one of my employees comes to me with an issue or a question, I answer the question but also describe to them the best way to gain my assistance in the future. I will usually emphasize to them that, unless it is an urgent situation, the best approach is to send me a short summary email outlining the request, a few options for resolution, and the timing that my feedback is required. I let them know that typically I will answer requests like this faster and more fully because of the thoughtful way I was approached (no interruptions). Again, if you feel that the person is coachable, recommend a more efficient way that they can request your help in the future.

# Assessment & Action

**Time lost is never found again.**

**-Benjamin Franklin**

## **Questions for Thought and Reflection:**

- ✓ What are the top time wasters in your day?
- ✓ What is the single highest priority in your business day?
- ✓ Who do you know that manages time/priorities well?
- ✓ If you had an extra five hours per week, what would you do to advance your professional goals?

## **Actions Steps:**

- ✓ Invest thirty minutes per day determining five items to accomplish and five items to delay or discard.
- ✓ Begin your workday fifteen minutes earlier than usual to read and respond to the three most important emails in your inbox.
- ✓ Ask your manager to identify your top three areas/projects for improvement and how improvement will be measured.
- ✓ Keep a weekly log of how you spend your time, identifying how much time was spent on priorities, on urgent issues and on time wasters.

# Communication

People skills are necessary when dealing with the many personalities in a corporate environment. The ability to transition conversations with people without cracking the foundation of the relationship is critical. To make better time choices, I recommend that you learn to set boundaries, think like an owner, and more efficiently manage interruptions.

## **Setting Boundaries**

Let's assume you have a boss who continually interrupts you from productive tasks with non-urgent requests. Are you more likely to take the concern directly to your boss or to simply complain to co-workers who cannot help? Set up a meeting with your boss to revisit the goals and expectations of your role. This tactful communication will help you develop well-understood boundaries for those that you work with even if he or she is your superior. Once you get the direction of what is important to your boss, you have created a contract for action that allows you to opt out of unproductive dialogues or meetings that are not aligned with the goals that you and your boss have agreed on.



## **Think Like an Owner**

Another challenge requires us to have a crucial conversation with ourselves about the personal missteps that interfere with our productivity during the day. Overindulgence in surfing the web or personal calls with friends creates bad habits that reduce productivity and, more importantly, earning power over time. You may be popular with friends, but you are judged at work by one thing - RESULTS. Realize that if you do not produce results in your position, someone else will. With that in mind, it's best to act as if you own the



company. By shifting your mindset from employee to owner, you will be more aligned with the thinking of the most successful people in the company and one day you may be paid like them.

### **Managing Interruptions**

Did you know that on average, people spend 30% of their time tending to unplanned interruptions? If you are in a leadership position within your company, it is crucial that you train your team on how and when you are most receptive to information and the types of information you deem valuable. For example, in my line of work, critical customer issues or feedback on revenue opportunities are what I refer to as “cut in line” discussions. The conversation may interrupt my day, but if I deal with negative issues when they are small, I can minimize corporate crisis. The key is that your team must believe that you do not have a “shoot the messenger” mentality. As a leader, you have to decide what a “cut in line” issue is for your team, and it must be clearly communicated.

# Assessment & Action

***Nothing is less productive than to make more efficient what should not be done at all.”***

***-Peter Drucker***

## **Questions for Thought and Reflection:**

- ✓ Who consistently creates unproductive conversations in your workday?
- ✓ What topics are you anxious about speaking on with your manager and/or co-workers?
- ✓ What feedback might you share with your manager if you weren't afraid?
- ✓ Have you communicated to your team how best to obtain your time for support and assistance?

## **Actions Steps:**

- ✓ When people ask for support and assistance, control conversation time.
- ✓ Stop signing up for things that are not important to your manager.
- ✓ Don't begin new tasks at the end of your workday. It can leave you with a feeling of non-productiveness.
- ✓ Use a timer to create mini-deadlines to keep you on track with your goals.

# Focus

While it is important to be accessible and responsive in our 24/7/365 culture, one thing hasn't changed: you will be measured by the results that you and your team deliver. Dedicated focus on critical tasks is a key component to achieving these results. With that in mind, there are a few things to think about for adding focus to your day.

## **Illusions of Multitasking**

Many people believe that multitasking is a necessary skill to be successful in business but in my experience, multitasking is often an illusion of progress. Let's look at this common scenario: you are driving home from work at 65mph, you're on your cell phone with your spouse, and you are listening to the radio all at the same time. In this scenario, does multitasking make you a safe driver or a danger to yourself and those around you? I think the answer is clear.

The ability to get things done quickly should not take the place of doing things well. A typical corporate meeting these days shows each person in the room with their laptop open, cell phone in hand, and an occasional glance at the projector screen where someone is presenting. You can probably think of several examples in your own life where multitasking is just an illusion. I recommend that if you find yourself multitasking, take a moment to determine which task is most important, and make an effort to focus on only on that.

## **Communicating Priorities**

Prioritizing tasks is a great way to help you stay focused. Beyond setting priorities however, it is important to communicate those priorities to those above and below you. I recommend that you develop a process of communicating your top three priorities to your manager on a regular basis, perhaps once or twice per week. This is preferably done by phone or in person and should last for less than five minutes. During the dialogue, ask if there is anything that your manager would like to address that is not on your priority list.

This conversation has several purposes as it keeps you on the same page with the person who sets your salary, allows you to proactively get feedback or revisions to your priorities, and lessens the chances you will be interrupted for trivial tasks from your manager because a verbal contract has been made for the areas of your focus. If you are a supervisor, then you have an opportunity to reach out to your team and create an environment to improve communication and commitment to focus on the right projects at the right time.

### **Manage Meeting Time More Efficiently**

Everyone loses when meetings are poorly managed. As a person with sufficient focus, you should never accept meeting invitations without reviewing the agenda first. If the entire meeting does not require you to be present, ask the chairperson for permission to be excused after your contribution to the meeting is delivered. This allows you to participate in the meeting but also have time to focus on accomplishing your other work. I also recommend that you read articles on facilitating productive meetings. This will give you a way to offer suggestions on how to improve meetings that you lead or attend.

### **Use Technology Wisely**

I think we can all agree that technology is great, but it must be used wisely to help you stay focused on what you need to accomplish. I recommend that you set a period in the day when you step away from all of your electronic leashes (cell phone, emails, office phone, etc.) to focus on work rather than focusing on interruptions. I understand that certain emergencies may come up during this time, but it is counterproductive for anyone to immediately read each received email or answer the phone every time it rings. Use this time to work on the projects that need the most focus. Finally, I believe you should end each day with an email of what you accomplished and what you expect to accomplish the next day. Then send it to yourself and read it first thing when you arrive in the morning. Not only will this allow you to focus on your accomplishments, but it also provides a priority list for you to have first thing the next day.



# Assessment & Action

**The secret to multitasking is that it isn't actually multitasking. It's just extreme focus and organization.**

**-Joss Whedon, American Screenwriter**

## **Questions for Thought and Reflection:**

- ✓ Are you concentrating your time and efforts on what matters most?
- ✓ When did you last review your job description with your manager?
- ✓ Do you prioritize tasks or work in order of assignment?
- ✓ Do you often find yourself in meetings where nothing seems to be accomplished?

## **Actions Steps:**

- ✓ Create two, one hour time blocks where you focus on one task only.
- ✓ Ask to be excused from meetings where you are not adding or gaining value to work on assignments of priority.
- ✓ Compare your calendar with priorities, highlighting those that align with your top five priorities.
- ✓ Keep your inbox clean. You should be able to discard 70% of emails by glancing at the subject.

# Information Retention

## Information Retention

Information retention is another daily struggle that we all face. The increase in the quantity and types of information creates an avalanche of data that must be processed effectively if we want to translate this information into meaningful action. You will find a couple tips below that should help you process and reflect on information more productively.



## Note Taking

Becoming a ferocious note taker has helped relieve me of the pressure of trying to replay key meeting points by memory. You do not need to write out notes word for word but instead take down key words that can trigger your memory of details. This allows you to flow between capturing content and concentrating on the meeting at hand. Once a week, I make a point to review all of my notes from meetings during the week. It is amazing how many times I simply forgot an important item, but was able to recover it by reading through my notes consistently.

## Collaboration

If I am asked to work on a project that requires collaborative support, I will typically tentatively agree to work on the project until I can have a conversation with the other collaborators. Before I commit to any task or delivery time, I make sure that I have buy-in from everyone else on the team, as well as anyone else I may need to help get my part done. By doing this, I avoid any ambiguity about what I am expected to contribute and when my contribution is needed on the given project. Additionally, everyone who is key to the success of the project is involved in setting expectations.

# Assessment & Action

**If everyone is moving forward together, then success takes care of itself.**

**—Henry Ford**

## **Questions for Thought and Reflection:**

- ✓ Do you accept assignments without having clear direction about outcomes or timelines?
- ✓ Do you find yourself in so many meetings that you are not able to accomplish your work?
- ✓ Do you often forget action items assigned to you because of poor notes or un-reviewed notes?
- ✓ Do you ever work on projects where you feel like the work is not well distributed?

## **Actions Steps:**

- ✓ Ensure that collaborative assignments are clearly defined.
- ✓ When taking notes, focus on insights, ideas and actions. Meeting notes and meeting minutes are not the same.
- ✓ Do not start on a project without adequate preparation.
- ✓ Reduce your open projects by 25% to increase task completion rates.

# Final Thoughts

The essence of time choices is knowing the difference between what's important now, later, or never. Improving time choices requires a consistent commitment to reduce time wasters in your personal and professional life. By reflecting on how specific meetings, conversations, and tasks build your foundation for success, you will begin to raise your expectation for how your time is invested.

Being responsive to co-workers does not mean that you allow yourself to be easily interrupted, but does provide an opportunity to use people skills and prioritization to achieve the best possible outcomes. Multitasking is great when it is used in situations that make sense, but there are times where concentration and focus are more important.

Everyone would like more hours in the day but that is impossible to attain. Research shows that we instinctively cling to tasks that make us feel busy. Feeling busy provides us with a false sense of importance when it's not about the time you spend but the results you produce. By thinking consciously about how you spend your time, deciding which tasks matter most and dropping or delegating the rest, we make ourselves more productive.

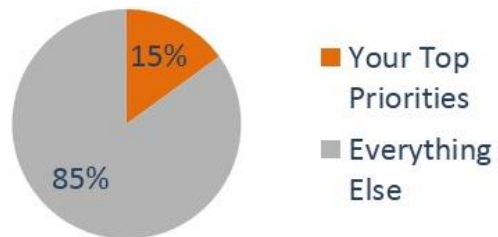


## ***Worksheets***

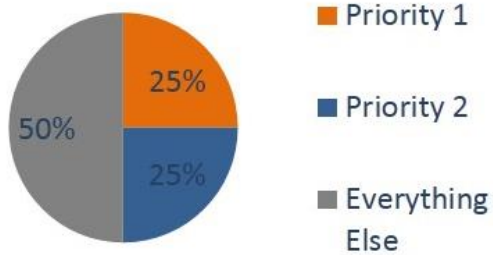
# Workday Evaluation

## How Do You Spend Your Day?

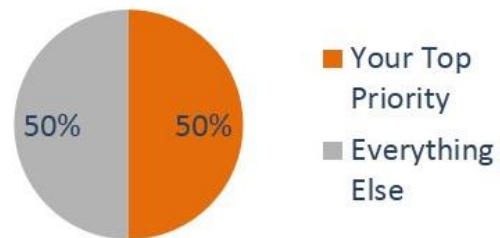
**Time Waster**



**Productive**



**Laser Focus**



**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Priority 1:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Priority 2:** \_\_\_\_\_

# What is Your Primary Focus for...?



**Business:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Key Relationships:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Personal Life:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Physical Health:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Spiritual Life:** \_\_\_\_\_

# Priority Matrix

A good way to organize your priorities is by using the Covey Time Management Grid. Sort your “To Do” list into the appropriate quadrants on the grid while keeping in mind the time needed to accomplish each task.

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
I M P O R T A N T	Quadrant I: immediate and important deadlines _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	Quadrant II: long-term strategizing and development _____ _____ _____ _____ _____
N O T  I M P O R T A N T	Quadrant III: time pressured distractions. _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	Quadrant IV: activities that yield little value toward accomplishing your priorities _____ _____ _____ _____ _____

Source: Stephen Covey, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*

# About Donald Thompson

**“Everyone wants to be on their organization’s Valuable Employees List. The right mindset can get you there.” - Donald Thompson**



Donald Thompson is a leader known for solving business problems where no formula exists. He develops competitive and sustainable solutions for global companies, entrepreneurs and emerging leaders.

As the CEO of the technology company, I-Cubed, where he was given the reigns at age 36, Donald dramatically grew the organization in our recent downturn economy. With no outside capital, the company flourished, going from 16 to 130 employees recording annual revenue growth of 30%, from 2008-2013.

In 2014, I-Cubed was acquired by the global technology enterprise, [KPIT](#). Currently, Donald leads global teams, heading KPIT’s PLM business for North America and serves on the Board of Directors for iCiDIGITAL, a spin off business from I-Cubed.

With a belief in **“*optimizing the potential of your people,*”** Donald groomed his [iCiDIGITAL](#) successor from technologist to President.

Donald is an emeritus member of the strategic advisory board for North Carolina State University’s [Computer Science Department](#), is Executive Chairman for [O3 Creative](#), serves on several upstart company boards and is also franchise owner for the [Navi Mumbai Sabres](#) of the [Elite Football League of India](#).

As a thought leader, business strategist and keynote speaker, Donald was once named among the Top 25 Technical Professionals in Research Triangle Park, NC by Business Leader Magazine. He has been heralded as the **“[American Dream](#)”** in the media and is often referred to as **“*the unlikely CEO.*”**

Donald’s personal philosophy is **“*continuous improvement,*”** an approach to success he communicates to business leaders and employees, including Millennials, for which he has earned an esteemed reputation.

His ability to clarify strategic thinking and promote problem solving has benefited many with their own personal success-two reasons why Donald is highly sought as a mentor and speaker globally.

Donald's leadership abilities extend to involvement in the Young Presidents' Organization ([YPO](#)) and Information Technology Senior Management Forum ([ITSMF](#)). In associating with global business leaders through these prestigious peer networks, Donald stresses training and lifelong learning.

***“Developing the business frontrunner in you,”*** is a theme in Donald's work. It's led him to create a series of eBooks: ***“Leadership Lessons,”*** which are aimed at professionals, entrepreneurs, business organizations, and educational communities looking to optimize business practices and be better able to compete.

With a philanthropic focus on students and veterans, Donald supports many organizations that provide financial assistance and opportunities that foster professional and personal success. His pro bono work includes speaking engagements and seminars for military and millennials, such as the [Shelton Leadership Forum](#).

Donald is future-focused and intent on the next challenge. For more on leadership, driving revenue streams, social responsibility and Donald's availability as a speaker, go to [www.donaldthompson.com](http://www.donaldthompson.com).