



## **TIME — THE MOST INEFFICIENTLY USED RESOURCE**

The 1973-1976 comprised "hard times" for many agribusiness managers. The revolving door to that highly cherished executive suite has accelerated to a speed never before recorded. Professor E. F. Jennings of Michigan State University is a noted expert in the area of management mobility and claims that managers, chairmen, and presidents have been replaced before mandatory retirement at a rate almost twice that of any previous three-year period. Obviously no single factor is to blame. The mid-1970's imposed many burdens on the shoulders of our agribusiness managers. Commodity and resource price variations reached record proportions. Inflationary pressures reduced many well-conceived management plans to a state of chaos. The impact of the economic recession was both severe and long lasting. In many sectors of the agricultural economy, recovery is yet distant and highly visionary.

Economic history has shown that management is responsive to change. Yet the evidence would suggest that managers react with more vigor and assurance to the challenges of an expanding economy than to the demands of a recessionary one. But economic cycles are not new to the agribusiness industry. Why, then, has the most recent cycle proved to be so devastating to the ranks of managerial personnel? What has changed?

### **A Substantive Difference**

The current-generation manager acquired his particular talents and abilities through his experiences in the unparalleled

affluence of the 1960's. During this period, recessions were moderate and short-lived. Each was met with conservative management programs. In some cases, management implemented little more than "holding actions" designed to do little more than await the passing of the storm, after which they returned to their long-established, fair-weather, expansionary programs. Many managers returned to this same stop go strategy with the onset of the 1974-75 recession. They soon realized that this was no ordinary recession, however, as ecological constraints, capital deficits, consumerism, equal employment controls, safety regulations, and continued price inflation combined to place demands on management few were equipped to handle.

The timeliness of regulatory adherence, pricing decisions, and investment analysis became ever more critical. The pressures of the day reached such proportions that few managers were able to look beyond the next working day. Time constraints resulted in the inability of some executives to anticipate and deal adequately with the consequences of the multifaceted problems imposed on them. Time, therefore, became the most restricted of all resources employed in the agribusiness industry.

As managers grappled with their shortage of time, "hang loose" became the common cliché of consolation. Yet any common idiot can hang loose while the world around him crumbles. It is surely the least demanding of managerial mandates. What was really needed was an enhanced managerial ability to use time more efficiently.

## Time Prioritization

"People don't lack time — they just don't use it effectively." These are the words of Alan Lakein, a San Francisco-based management consultant who has made a career out of helping people to make better use of their time. Mr. Lakein has made several major contributions towards a manager's better use of time. His program for time prioritization is, perhaps, the most substantive. The concept of prioritization is not that novel, of course, but Lakein's suggestions provided substance to the conceptual framework.

***Internal prime time*** was coded A-1 and ***defined as that time viewed by the manager as being his most productive.***

We all know that each individual operates on his own internal time clock. Some individuals find that their early morning hours are their most productive. Others find that they are slow starters and require several hours of routine office behavior before their peak of mental proficiency is reached. Still others carry their heavy workload home with them where the evening hours' isolation from the hectic office environment comprises a setting more conducive to concentration and productivity.

Each manager should consider his own internal time clock and assign to that peak period of the day those managerial tasks of the highest priority. This time period, once it is identified, should then be subdivided into "***alone time***" and "***contact time.***" As you would expect, the alone time should be interruption-free and the surroundings so structured as to keep it that way. The open-door policy of many contemporary managers has much to recommend it. Yet at the same time, such a policy should not be so strongly adhered to as to preclude some alone time practice. Contact time should represent that period wherein essential office business with others is taken care of. This period need not be ritualized to a point where a daily time slot is so scheduled. Yet on a more flexible basis, the manager is encouraged to

recognize each morning that some timeslot is to be devoted to necessary communications with others on high-priority issues.

Management's likely difficulty with the A-1 classification will not rest solely with the identification of priority issues. Moreover, several studies have shown that such identification is both possible and relatively accurate. Rather, management's difficulty will be one of persistence, i.e., the ability of the manager to stick to a high-priority project, once it takes on the appearance of being either overwhelming or unpleasant.

I recall one agribusiness manager whose task it was to prepare a prospectus for a proposed capital expansion plan. The task was easily identified as high priority in terms of both the magnitude of the project and the fact that the board meeting especially scheduled to review the proposal was just two weeks away. Each morning the manager would ask his secretary to head off telephone calls as he worked alone on this important project. But each morning this manager would quickly confront the complexity of his task and become discouraged with his inability "to get a handle on" its magnitude. As his level of discouragement rose, procrastination became ever more attractive. Soon the manager had placed aside the prospectus and was deeply engrossed in the pursuit of routine (and lesser priority) daily chores.

## The Swiss Cheese Approach

We have all experienced situations similar to that described above. The overwhelming nature of the project reduces our ability to stick with the task, despite its priority rating. The "Swiss cheese approach" could represent a suitable solution. In essence, this approach suggests that a manager reduce the magnitude or complexity of his assigned task by poking holes in it.

Search for tiny, five-minute tasks that fall within the scope of the giant project. In particular, search for those small items within the larger project, which you view as

personally attractive and achievable. Then punch away at these items first. Before long the full task will appear less formidable and as your involvement increases, so will your confidence and enthusiasm.

### **That Which Is Enjoyable**

**A-2 priority tasks** are identified as those, which are also demanding and timely. Yet they differ from those in the A-1 category in that they are **viewed by the managers with a deep sense of personal interest**. A finely tuned and sophisticated machine can withstand just so much heat and vibration after which it will either break down or lose its efficiency. Human beings are no different. Each manager has a specific level at which he can absorb data and convert it, over time, into the decision-making process. If the demands exceed this human machine's stated capacity, efficiency is reduced and time utilization is destroyed. Hence the manager must divert some of his time from A-1 projects to those, which he finds truly enjoyable.

The resultant experience works very much in the same fashion as the maintenance and regular servicing of the finely tuned machine. The restoration aspects of A-2 project involvement are very important. If each day the manager devotes some time to that high-priority project he really enjoys, he will leave the office each day with a feeling of accomplishment rather than frustration and contempt. As a young man on a dairy farm, I discovered that the early morning milking was a task that was definitely A-1. But in his wisdom, my grandfather recognized that I enjoyed most the care and feeding of the replacement heifer calves. By adroitly assigning this latter task to be my full responsibility, A-1 and A-2 time utilization was rendered more efficient.

### **Timeliness vs. Routine**

Time-use prioritization is extended further into the B and C classifications. Those **tasks classified as B are those which are deserving of serious managerial consideration, but to which specific**

**deadlines or time constraints are not attached**. The penalty for procrastination is not so evident here. In fact, intentional delays may even be justified in one's search for additional analysis or data. The use of prime time in pursuit of B tasks is not recommended. "**Available time**" would seem more descriptive of that to be consumed in the performance of these tasks. Almost all managers complain that they are unable to find the time to keep up with essential reading and industry communications. Such activities might be classified as B. Try to set aside one hour each day for such pursuits. For example, try to avoid all scheduled appointments after 4 p.m. each afternoon and return to your office after this time to pursue that reading material which appears inviting. If your reading uncovers important concerns or questions, place these in the A-1 category and tackle them early the next day.

As you would suspect, **C tasks** are defined as those, which are **routine or highly repetitive**. Once considered, you will be surprised at the volume of written correspondence, phone calls, and supplemental reading that can be relegated to this lower-priority rating. For example, it's more important to read smarter than to read faster. This means doing away with the reading that's unsatisfying or only marginally informative. We are all familiar with the so-called "round file," i.e., the disposal device into which the excesses are entombed. It may prove advisable to establish a "C file" as well. Into this file goes those **routine items demanding neither immediate nor concentrated attention**. At day's end, this file should be quickly reviewed. Some items can be quickly disposed of, others can be delegated to lower managerial levels for disposition, and still others can be relegated to the round file.

### **Classification Strategy**

The discussion above suggests that managers can quickly appraise their daily workload and then easily pigeonhole each

task in the appropriately prioritized classification. Obviously, this is a gross oversimplification and even after classification the load may prove too great and/or time too short. Criteria for deciding what priority to assign each daily task is not well defined. In an attempt to address this deficiency, the manager may use the following questions to assist in the prioritization process.

1. How does the task relate to the goals of your firm? If the connection cannot be made, mark it down.
2. Check the time constraints of the task. As the degree of immediacy increases, so should its prioritization.
3. From what source does the pressure arise? Obviously an important customer or your director deserves higher priority than someone with whom you relate only casually.
4. What are your personal preferences? As the time pressures build and your level of irritability rises, rely more heavily on that which is instinctively more enjoyable to you.
5. What is the nature of the task? Can the assignment be equally well handled by others? Can the effort be combined in a complementary manner with other activities? Is it a task which lends itself towards consolidation or does it require a heavy amount of preparation?

### **Time Savers**

The list of timesaving suggestions provided below is not meant to be all-inclusive. Not all suggestions will be easily incorporated into your personal managerial style. Hopefully, however, they will provide some guidelines by which your time can be employed more efficiently.

1. Don't add to the paperwork surplus. As you receive written material,

scrutinize it thoroughly and "round file" nonessential papers as soon as you've read them. Similarly, try not to impose large volumes of paper on others. Keep it **brief, concise, and direct**.

2. **Avoid those marathon, weekend work sessions.** Studies have shown that the habitual weekend worker is often the least time-efficient. Few managers can maintain a seven-day workweek schedule and remain at peak performance. Use the weekends to recharge your batteries and the Monday-Friday period will become less debilitating.
3. **Concentrate your work efforts.** Avoid jumping from one project to another, if possible. Keep your attention zeroed-in on one project at a time. Use the prioritization concept to help identify those areas most deserving of your attention and then stick to your convictions.
4. Be kind to yourself. **Give yourself a reward for special accomplishments.** Take some time off after completing a particularly rigorous project. Force yourself to slip in an enjoyable task between two or more efforts, which have proven to be very demanding.
5. **Carry note cards.** Use these cards to jot down ideas and questions as they arise. Then review these cards before leaving the office at the end of each day.
6. Force yourself to **think ahead**. If necessary, make yourself a "shopping list" of items to be accomplished tomorrow, or before the end of the week. Think in terms of long-term benefits and complications, and then utilize your time accordingly.

7. **Live within your own conscience.** Accept those priorities, which you have established and don't vacillate over their legitimacy. Concentrate on those parts of a large project, which you judge to be most profitable. Chances are that you, alone, are the best judge of your own time-use effectiveness.
8. **Don't waste time contemplating your failures or feeling guilty** about what you've been unable to accomplish. **Accept your own limitations.** Try to learn from your failures, but don't overwork them. Move on to the next project with determination and your spirit still intact.
9. **Make better use of "down time."** Many modern-day managers find it necessary to travel a great deal and find that vast amounts of time are burned up in transit and waiting in airline terminals and the like. The effective use of such down time need not be work oriented. Relax, read a good book, or do something, which you wouldn't otherwise have time to do.
10. **Scrutinize your old habits.** Assess them regularly for the possibility of streamlining those more time-intensive patterns. Each of us has a set of peculiar personal habits, many of which might be condensed or modified without a detrimental effect on our level of enjoyment or convenience.
11. **Don't belabor the trivial** but recognize that inevitably some of your time will be spent on **activities outside your control.** Do what you can to avoid that which appears frivolous, but don't become depressed when these efforts are suppressed by the dictates of others.

## Summary

Experts agree that the immediate past has generated more managerial stress on the quality of working life. No quality is more needed — and more lacking — in today's cadre of agribusiness manager than the ability to deal effectively with ever-increasing industry complexities within time constraints that are more or less fixed. This paper is designed to provide for agribusiness managers some thoughts on how their limited time might be used more effectively. Time prioritization, in particular, is discussed as one alternative means. Several time-saving suggestions are also discussed. Each manager's ability to incorporate such time-efficient skills will differ. Yet each manager must cultivate this ability or he may find himself in the revolving door that's expelling executives from similar offices throughout the industry at an ever-increasing rate.

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