Managing Time for Results

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This article is the third in the "Managing for Results" series. In this segment, the authors suggest ways for managers of nuclear medicine departments to manage their time more effectively, as well as more efficiently. Characteristics of effective time managers and a strategy for using time more productively are discussed. Once again a worksheet is included to direct your thinking about the key ideas addressed in the article. Those wishing to earn CEU (VOICE) credit for these continuing education articles must return a completed worksheet for each article in the series.

In a letter we received two months ago, the chief nuclear medicine technologist of a prominent East coast teaching hospital described her "typical" day in great detail to us: completing paperwork, attending meetings, troubleshooting transport problems, counseling staff technologists and students, dealing with physicians, seeing sales representatives, etc. At the end of her 5-page, single-spaced letter she closed with one succinct question—"How can I manage my time more efficiently and get my job back under control?"

More recently, we received another letter, this one from an alumnus of one of last year's Squibb Nuclear Medicine Management Workshops. At the time of the workshop, he had just been given a very difficult assignment. He was charged with combining the historically antagonistic radiology, nuclear medicine, and ultrasound departments (each one experiencing the most severe performance and morale problems in its history) into one cohesive, high performance/high morale area. Needless to say, we were delighted to read that performance and morale in the now one-year-old department has improved and that it is indeed beginning to function as a unit. We were also pleased that he attributed a good deal of his success to a plan he developed at our workshop, with the help of his fellow workshop participants. He too chose to close his letter to us with an extremely

interesting question—"Now that I have things back in some semblance of order, I find I'm spending most of my time *maintaining* our recent successes. How can I shift myself out of this maintenance role and move my department from an acceptably performing department to an exceptionally performing one?"

In this article we intend to suggest an approach to time management that we believe will answer the questions of both our two friends, even though their situations and needs differ considerably.

Common Views Toward Time and Their Implications

How do you feel about time? Are you frustrated because there's simply never enough time for you to do the things you want or have to do? Perhaps you're upset when time seems to fly past so quickly that you're never quite able to improve how you use this precious resource. Maybe it's that you're exasperated—you simply don't have time to worry about how to use your time!

If you can identify with any of the above comments, you're not alone. These are the three most common responses of participants in our Squibb Nuclear Medicine Management Workshops. In fact, these are the type of answers we almost inevitably get when we ask that question of managers anywhere, anytime, regardless of industry or discipline. Clearly, the general consensus these days is that time, in and of itself, is a problem. To most managers, time is yet another troublesome "ball" that must be juggled at least fairly well so that they can have time to deal with all the other balls for which they're responsible. As a consequence of this popular view toward time, recent literature on time management has focused almost exclusively on improving managerial *efficiency* through a variety of techniques most of which are designed to improve the discretionary time of managers (i.e., the time managers have to work on items of their choice).

We believe that this is an excellent example of the prevailing wisdom in "management science" being, if not downright harmful to managers, at least much less

than helpful. Focusing primarily on managerial efficiency, and therefore on time-saving techniques, violates one of the most important principles of the "Managing for Results" approach—"there's no right way to do the wrong things." Far more serious than violating a principle, however, is the fact that today's overwhelming emphasis on efficiency and techniques (at the expense of effectiveness and attitudes) often serves to reinforce, and finally, institutionalize, managerial nonperformance.

By way of example, study after study has shown that managers work at an unrelenting pace and that their activities are characterized by brevity, variety, and discontinuity. Further, studies also report that there are apparently no important patterns in the way managers schedule their time. Managers seem to jump from issue to issue, continually responding to the needs of the moment. As a result, this pattern usually leads them to be superficial in their actions (to overload themselves with work, encourage interruptions, respond quickly to every stimulus, seek the tangible and avoid the abstract, make decisions in small increments, and do everything abruptly). Given this unfortunate scenario, it is no wonder that the traditional approach toward time management is so popular. To managers trapped in this vicious cycle and feeling increasingly powerless to break out of it, the prospect of improving their time efficiency by 5–10% looks very attractive. However, by choosing this route, they do two things: they resign themselves to continuing their cycle of "busy nonperformance" and they settle on making their stay minimally more efficient and enjoyable. It is indeed ironic that traditional time-management techniques, instead of working as promised, often end up reinforcing and then cementing the status quo—giving managers a false sense of progress in the meantime.

Time and Management Traps

Our years of experience with nuclear medicine department managers have led us to the conclusion that very few feel fully in control of the way they use time. Our two friends cited at the beginning of this article illustrate two kinds of situations we commonly deal with in our workshops. The first circumstance is where the manager feels his situation is beginning to be, or is already out of control and he wants to eliminate the craziness and regain some stability. The second involves the manager whose situation is somewhat under control, but who is just not satisfied. This manager wants to improve the performance of his area significantly. Both situations to us are fundamentally time management issues, primarily because we see time management as not another ball to be juggled, but (to carry the analogy further) instead as the *process* of juggling. In other words, we see time management and what is usually described as management practice as the same thing. Second, in both situations, the crux of the problem is actually that while each manager knows he should be managing (and therefore using his time) differently, he finds it

difficult if not impossible to actually do so. Why is this? What accounts for the inability of managers to break free from their old time and management traps?

One possible explanation, of course, is that the pressure of the job prevents managers from breaking out of these traps. As we discussed earlier, the manager's job is usually characterized as a reactive one. All too often, we are told that managers spend their days "seeing the urgent crowd out the important". Surely this could be a strong impediment for managers seeking to break free of their old patterns and in some cases it is. However, in most cases this is not the cause of the problem at all. Rather, it's the most visible manifestation of the less obvious underlying problem.

We don't believe that managers are forced by the pressure of their jobs to expend all their energies on trivialities; in fact, just the opposite seems to us to be true. It is our observation that, to many managers, the challenges of management are seen as so difficult and anxiety-provoking that they allow their days to be filled with details and interruptions in order to protect themselves from having any time to contemplate what they are failing to do. This is especially the case when people are promoted into managerial positions without adequate preparation, such as the staff technologist who is notified on Friday that he is to be the new chief technologist beginning Monday. It's very easy for these people to be drawn into working on matters that demonstrate their "busyness", or to work on some new time-management technique that increases the efficiency of their busyness, even if these activities don't necessarily lead to results. Unfortunately, the more managers succumb to this unproductive pattern, the more likely they are to feel increasingly frustrated, pressured, and full of anxiety—which in turn leads to even greater temptations to escape either into new flurries of activity or into new time-saving techniques.

No doubt by now, you're beginning to wonder if we have anything hopeful at all to say on this subject. Well, we do. We've seen managers all across the country who use their time, and therefore manage, both effectively and efficiently. As we've said in our previous two articles, these managers are an extremely eclectic group in terms of their backgrounds, personalities, styles, competencies, goals, resources, approaches, and work environments. They come thin and not so thin, expressive and quiet, "ask-oriented" and "tell-oriented", and in all colors, both sexes, and every shoe size. However, in spite of all these differences, they do share one important similarity—over the years they have resisted the temptation to fall into the activity or busyness trap and have instead acquired a set of habits or practices that allows them to focus on *results*.

Managing for Results

From comments we've received from over 200 *Journal of Nuclear Medicine Technology* readers, it seems as

though most of you agree that there is some validity to the generic, conceptual kinds of descriptions we've already shared about the habits effective managers of nuclear medicine departments have in common. These managers:

1. Have a clear managerial vision for the department; i.e., these managers know what the central purposes of their departments are and they have defined their key short- and long-term goals clearly.
2. Consistently devise realistic strategies for accomplishing key goals in ways that involve and engage other people in the process from start to finish.
3. Embody these strategies in projects that are designed to succeed and that not only help achieve both the short- and long-term goals of their departments, but that also develop their people (both personally and professionally) at the same time.
4. Insist upon sensible allocations of resources, such as time, money, etc. by continually striving to do the right things at the right time.

With this as background, the questions we wish to address for the remainder of this article are (1), how do these managers view and then approach time; and (2), how can those of us who are now focusing on busyness and activity, or who simply want to improve our effectiveness, break out of our time and management traps in order to focus on results?

Managing Time for Results

The managers we've met who manage for results view time very differently from most managers. The table below summarizes most of the important differences.

TABLE 1. Different Managerial Approaches to Time

Most managers believe:	Managers who manage time for results believe:
1. Time is a problem	1. We are the problem; time is a scapegoat
2. Time flies	2. Time moves at a fixed rate
3. We can save time	3. We can't hoard or overspend time
4. We can make up time	4. Once spent, time is irreplaceable
5. We never have enough time	5. We have all there is!

Since they see time as a finite, perishable, scarce, and absolutely essential resource, effective managers treat time with a great deal of respect. As a result of this view, their approach to the use of time is also very different from most managers. For example, instead of asking themselves periodically if they're working as efficiently as possible, they often ask themselves if they're doing the right things, the things that will lead them to their desired results. They know, in other words, that they cannot afford to spend 80% of their time on items that

lead to only 20% of their results, so they don't.

As a *Journal* reader from Arizona pointed out to us, effective managers "seem continually aware of the fact that efficiency of the input doesn't necessarily equate to the quality or nature of the output". Further, instead of having some vague sense of how they spend time, effective managers take pride in the fact that they actually analyze the use of their time on almost a continuous basis. This is then compared against their list of priorities, in order to improve their efficiency (yes, these managers are concerned with efficiency as well). Finally, effective managers refuse to let work-related anxieties pressure them into ignoring the serious issues that need to be faced. What they tend to do is break down these seemingly insurmountable problems into smaller, more manageable pieces and involve others in attacking them directly. Interestingly, by successfully tackling each of these smaller issues, a sense of confidence begins to emerge that causes both the manager and people around him to look at the next project as an opportunity, rather than as another problem.

This last characteristic of managers who focus on results is perhaps the most important of all. If you are interested in either escaping from the time and management traps that hinder your effectiveness or in simply improving the performance of your acceptably performing department significantly—this is the means to do it. Hundreds of nuclear medicine department managers throughout the United States have successfully used what we have described as the "breakthrough approach" in order to begin the process of managing for results.

Breaking Away Through Breakthroughs

Our advice on getting control over your time, or simply using your time more effectively is exactly the same as the advice we give when we're asked how managers can best manage for results: *focus*.

The best way we know of actually focusing your management efforts is through a strategy we described in the last article of our series as the "breakthrough" approach. Briefly stated, here are the steps in designing and then implementing breakthrough projects:

1. The manager should clearly define what his management vision is for his department. What is the central purpose of his department's existence? What long-term goals does he have for the department—defined in terms of results, not activities? What short-term objectives will be necessary to achieve these long-term goals?
2. The manager should devise a realistic strategy for achieving short- and long-term goals in such a way that tactics are focused squarely on the results defined above, and so that people who view themselves as the "stakeholders" in the issue are involved and engaged in the problem-solving process. This, of course, requires the manager to go and find out who believes they're major stake-

holders in the issue. It's surprising how often we can misjudge who feels significantly affected by a situation unless we actually get out and talk to people. Then the trick is to assess what part of the problem the stakeholders are most ready to begin with, and actually engage them in carrying out a breakthrough project.

3. The breakthrough project must be seen as timely and urgent, both by the manager and the stakeholders. It should also be possible to achieve the desired result in a relatively short period of time, say less than six weeks (if the overall goal will require months or years, the first project should aim at a subgoal or key increment). In addition, the breakthrough project must be able to be accomplished with the authority and resources currently available. Finally, the breakthrough project's objective must be defined in terms of results—not how many people have been trained, or the positive reactions experienced among people working on the problem together, but in terms of the volume of procedures completed, cost per test, percentage of fewer repeats, etc.

4. Once the first breakthrough project is completed successfully, managers should then build on this initial success by using the breakthrough approach on another one of those items that produces 80% of their results and that meets the criteria of a breakthrough project possibility.

We recommend this approach because we've seen it work. It forces the manager to define his vision and goals, it focuses the sustained efforts of a whole group of people on a project they see as important to them, and the projects are chosen carefully enough so that success (and thus continued momentum) is almost a given— allowing managers to build on these successes.

Some Closing Thoughts

☐ On one hand we're asking you to take a few steps back, relax the intensity of your work on present activities, and see the broader picture. On the other hand, we're asking you to take a few steps forward and address some potentially anxiety-provoking issues using a very intense, sustained approach.

☐ The most important breakthrough project of all is the first one. Make sure it is designed to be a quick, tangible *success* that people view as useful— no matter how small. Don't expect it to run perfectly. Since it's a first attempt, there are bound to be some problems. But make sure you learn and help others learn from these rough spots.

☐ Finally, the key to successfully managing time for results is *persistence.* As long as human beings manage nuclear medicine departments, there will be times when the requirements of the job create so much anxiety that we will retreat into our old time and management traps. Therefore, the approach we've described must be applied continually. With this approach in place, we believe you'll not only improve your managerial performance— but also increase the satisfaction you derive from your job as well.

Next Steps . . .

At this point, we'd like to urge you to apply some of the points we've raised in this article by completing the worksheet that follows. Please forward the worksheet to us in care of the Society of Nuclear Medicine. We hope to hear from you!

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