Time-management strategies for nurse leaders

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Planning and prioritizing can improve productivity and job satisfaction.

MANAGING TIME can be difficult, especially for nurse leaders attempting to handle busy schedules that include meetings, staffing problems, and other healthcare issues that occur throughout the workday. Some people consider a day completely occupied with commitments an indicator of good time-management skills. However, constantly moving from place to place or project to project doesn't mean that time is managed appropriately.

Poor time management can lead to inefficient work flow, wasted time, missed deadlines, poor-quality work, and decreased work satisfaction. This article will provide time-management strategies that nurse leaders can use in any setting.

Self-assessment

How do you begin your day? Do you immediately rush to check your email or voicemail and then begin addressing the newest problem? Conduct a time audit to assess how you currently manage your time. (See *What's a time audit?*)

Honestly evaluate your tendency to procrastinate and identify strategies to overcome it. For example, add due dates to your to-do lists and prioritize tasks that need to be completed. Remember that waiting to complete priority projects not only leads to mismanaged time, it also increases your stress levels.

Preparing in advance

Effective time management begins by planning ahead, so prepare for the next day by starting the night before. Get your clothes and coffee organized in advance, and have a to-do list ready to go. This strategy avoids rushing in the morning and helps prioritize activities before starting the workday.

Tackling projects

If you have a report, evaluation, or other project due, start your day by getting it done, even before you open your email. Focus on big projects first while you're still fresh and not distracted by other interrup-

tions. This approach may be difficult at first, but it will get easier with practice.

Other tips for tackling projects include breaking large jobs into smaller, more manageable tasks, prioritizing work activities to get the most important items done first, and completing similar activities together. For example, if you need to make follow-up phone calls, do them all at once. Another approach includes completing harder tasks first and leaving smaller, easier jobs for later in the day.

Managing email

Email can consume your day and become a constant distractor, keeping you away from bigger projects. Scheduling time throughout the day to purposely check and address email can make this process more time efficient.

Keep your inbox organized, using the "delete, do it, delegate, or defer" method. Decide whether the email can be deleted, should be immediately addressed, or can be delegated to someone else. If the email doesn't fall into any of those three categories, it can be left in the inbox to be managed later. Using folders to organize important emails saves time and eliminates an overwhelming inbox filled with hundreds of emails.

To avoid frustration and a restless night, don't check email right before going to bed. Similarly, don't check email while at personal or family events; it will only be distracting to you and others. Let your personal time belong to you and schedule regular intervals to check and address email.

Controlling meetings

Meetings have a reputation for being time wasters, but good time-management strategies can make them productive opportunities for collaboration. First, make sure the meeting is necessary. If it's not, you're wasting your time as well as others'. Sharing an agenda and pre-meeting assignments will indicate to attendees that the meeting is important and requires participation. Come prepared and start with the most important agenda item (not announcements or department updates) so that it's addressed efficiently and before the group becomes distracted by other items. Out of respect for your colleagues' schedules, meetings should begin and end on time.

What's a time audit?

A time audit can help you improve your time-management skills. It won't reveal 2-hour chunks of wasted time, but it will help you identify small increments that can be better managed. Start by tracking your time for 24 hours over 7 to 14 days.

When the tracking period is complete, review the log for opportunities to make improvements. You may identify interruptions or inefficient tasks, overuse of texting, and personal Internet and social media use. Or you might recognize small increments of time that could be used more efficiently. Managing time effectively often begins by identifying 5- and 10-minute gaps where small tasks can be completed.

Sample Time Log
Date: _____

Activity	Time	Total time involved	Priority	Activity (planned or not)	Comments
Did morning run and cooldown	6 AM – 6:25 AM	25 minutes	2	Yes	
Got ready for work	6:25 AM – 7:15 AM	50 minutes	2	Yes	
Commuted to work and stopped for coffee	7:15 AM – 8:05 AM	50 minutes	2	Yes	
Talked to coworker	8:05 AM – 8:09 AM	4 minutes	3	No	
Prepared for morning meeting	8:09 AM – 8:19 AM	10 minutes	1	Yes	
Attended meeting	8:30 AM – 10:42 AM	2 hours and 12 minutes	1	Yes	Meeting was scheduled to last 2 hours

Priority—1 = very important, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = not important

Confronting distractors

After you completed your time audit, you may have identified several time distractors, such as social media, texting, or Internet surfing. When working on big projects, taking a break to check text messages or social media can be tempting. However, these quick breaks lead to large chunks of mismanaged time and can distract you from completing projects.

You can confront these distractors by setting limits for using personal technology during the workday and managing other interruptions. For example, go to lunch at 11 AM or 1 PM instead of during the busy lunch hour. Limit social interruptions or unscheduled visits from coworkers by being aware of when and how they occur and placing a do-not-disturb sign on the door when doing work that requires immediate attention.

Taking care of yourself

Work and busy schedules can consume your day, and the work week can creep into the weekend. Many nurse leaders use the weekend to catch up on projects that they couldn't finish during the week. You may have busy seasons that require weekend work, but avoid the habit of taking work home. Give yourself opportunities to rest and rejuvenate by keeping at least one day a week free from work. And use personal time to give yourself a break from technology. Good time management includes time for yourself and personal relationships.

Be a good time manager

Busy nurse leaders rarely have large chunks of time to complete the many activities that require their attention. However, implementing good time-management strategies, such as planning and prioritizing, managing small increments of time, and including personal time away from work can improve productivity and job satisfaction. ★

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