

# Time Management<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Coordinators often feel like there isn't enough time in one day to do all that needs to be done. There always seems to be a new, urgent issue, and that new urgent issue always seems to take precedent over the last, possibly incomplete, urgent issue. Completing longer-term planning (and work) can feel like an impossibility. Even short-term planning may seem unrealistic. To meet their goals coordinators need to manage their time.

Coordinators can learn or improve their time management through practice.

Getting organized; Setting priorities; Eliminating non-priority tasks;; Interruptions, Time-wasters, Procrastination; Getting organized: To-Do lists, filing, planning/scheduling, **Do the right thing at the right time in the right way**, email

They may be very time-consuming and of little importance. Be sure to reserve time for the proactive tasks. Another way to think about all the tasks facing you is to consider the categories of urgent and important. They are not the same!

## Setting Priorities

Effective time management without the prioritization of goals and tasks to achieve them is difficult. To prioritize tasks, coordinators must know the goals they strive to achieve.

As discussed elsewhere in this handbook, coordinators share a common set of broad functions. Core Coordination Functions:

1. To ensure basic service delivery
2. To plan and strategize
3. To share information
4. To monitor performance
5. To build capacity in emergency preparedness and lead contingency planning
6. To advocate

Though provided in context-specific detail, a coordinator's goals should link to these functions. Coordination tasks should link to those goals.

The purpose of this sub-section is to review time management not to create coordinator priorities. However, by reflecting on coordination goals and the tasks, prioritization as part of a time-management process should become more tangible.

Take "To Share Information" as a sample function with a broad goal of ensuring basic service through meeting assessed needs and minimizing duplication of assistance. The outputs might include various information products, responsive partners, etc. Ensuring information sharing requires coordinators perform a number of tasks. These include:

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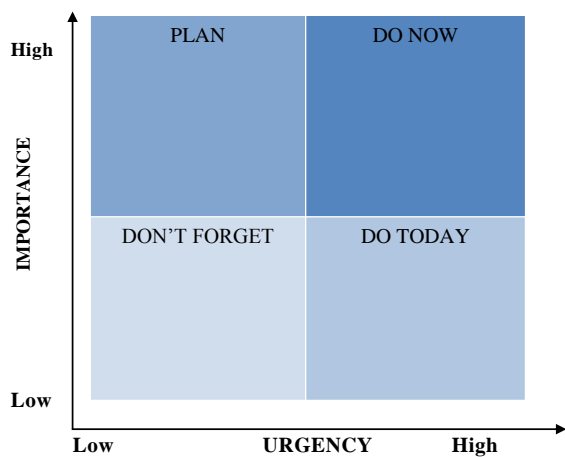
<sup>1</sup> The material in this section is adapted UNHCR Global Learning Center, "CCCLP Time Management: Better Use of Time."

- Facilitating and attending regular meetings
- Facilitating and attending thematic, emergency or ad hoc meetings
- Conducting briefings
- Drafting briefing notes, writing reports, etc.
- Creating and maintaining shared databases
- Contributing to web portals, exchange websites
- Calling, corresponding, texting, etc.
- Networking: formal and informal linking, exchanges, cultivation of relationships, etc.

All of these tasks take time. All can seem important if not urgent activities. To get all of them done consistently and well, coordinators need to know how to prioritize.

A coordinator trying to prioritize time dedicated to information-sharing, might list specific activities associated with the general tasks above. Having determined tasks and their associated activities, coordinators need to decide how to achieve them. A prioritization methodology can help.

Here are some questions to ask when prioritizing:



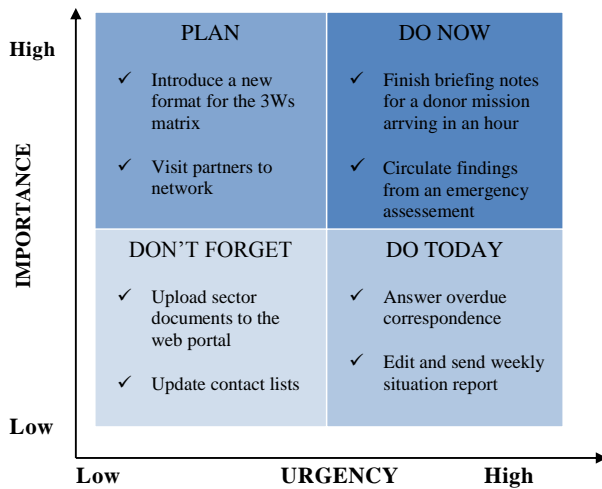
1. What important tasks are urgent?
2. What important tasks can wait?
3. What tasks are less important but can't wait?
4. What tasks are less important and can wait?

By asking and answering these questions, coordinators can create a framework for prioritization. For the coordinator in an emergency, doing this regularly can make the difference between managing a crisis and having a crisis manage you.

Prioritizing tasks for sharing information might look this:

1. What important tasks are urgent?
  - ✓ Finish briefing notes for a donor mission arriving in an hour **NOW!**
  - ✓ Circulate findings from an emergency assessment **NOW!**
2. What important tasks can wait?
  - ✓ **Plan** to introduce a new format for the 3Ws matrix
  - ✓ **Plan** to visit partners to network
3. What tasks are less important but can't wait?
  - ✓ Answer overdue correspondence **today**.
  - ✓ Edit and send weekly situation report **today**.
4. What tasks are less important and can wait?
  - ✓ **Don't forget** to upload sector documents to the web portal
  - ✓ **Don't forget** to update contact lists

The same information can be organized into the priority matrix.



When prioritizing your work, it can be helpful to maintain “to-do” lists or some other form of written reminders. Keep this simple, avoiding detail. This can make sorting priorities not only easier but also a more regular activity.

## Eliminating Non-Priority Tasks

Setting priorities is a big step toward effective time management. Eliminating tasks that are unimportant or that a coordinator shouldn't own is another. Different techniques can help:

1. Learn to say “no”: For many people this is easier said than done. Practical tips for doing it include:
  - Knowing your priorities.
  - Knowing what others are asking you to do and the implications of assuming a task.
  - Making sure others understand the scope of your coordination role.
  - Advising others on how best to complete the task without your taking part in it.
2. Delegate: Delegating can be equally challenging. Some people need, or perceive to need, to maintain control. Others don't know when to stop placing responsibilities with others.
  - Know what you can't delegate.
  - Don't “dump,” or give large or multiple tasks with little explanation.
  - Delegate with the appropriate levels of authority.
  - Monitor, mentor and coach those to whom you delegate.
3. Don't panic and don't rush: Coordinators are professional problem solvers but not all problems that come to them require their action. Time alone takes care of many things.
  - Be patient.
  - When you need to, wait.
  - Don't try to solve every problem.
  - Keep an eye out for non-issues and let them drop.

## Wasting Time

To manage your time, you need to manage yourself. Do you waste time? Do you know? The first step to stop wasting time is identifying what you do.

What time-wasters apply to you?

- ✓ **Over-committing:** Do you take on so much work you can't finish any jobs properly?
- ✓ **Email overload:** Are you swamped by correspondence?
- ✓ **Haste making waste:** Do your work so that you're ineffective?
- ✓ **Confused priorities:** Do use the time when you're most productive for non-priority tasks?
- ✓ **Excessive interruptions:** Do you tolerate constant interruptions, yours and others'?
- ✓ **Painful perfection:** Do you seek perfection in one task at the expense of other, important ones?
- ✓ **A cover for others:** Do you regularly do the work of others?
- ✓ **Constantly controlling:** Are you unwilling to delegate to subordinates work they can do?
- ✓ **Always adrift:** Are you unable to make or maintain self-imposed deadlines?
- ✓ **Meetings malaise:** Do having to attend irrelevant and badly run meetings?
- ✓ **Detrimental Desktop:** Are you unable to create and maintain files?
- ✓ **Waiting for Godot:** Are you always waiting for someone?

These are common time-wasters that don't need to keep wasting your time. Re-read the list and you'll see that sometimes the process of identifying time-wasters makes their solutions clear.

- If you're **swamped with email**, answer those that you are able to immediately and "flag" for later those requiring more time. Set up a "for action" folder for those messages.
- If you're **constantly interrupted**, carve at time every day when you let calls and emails go unanswered. Let others know you do this and don't compromise.
- If you're attending **irrelevant meetings**, make certain you need to be there or offer to facilitate. And, if the irrelevant meetings are yours, well, fix them.
- If you're hindered by **others' lack of punctuality**, politely let them know. The best way to reinforce the need for punctuality may be to lead by example.

Other issues are more complicated and may require that coordinators talk to their working group or inter-sector coordinators. Don't hesitate to explore the issues and solutions to them.

Remember that some activities crucial to effective coordination might appear to waste time. To facilitate fast, effective responses coordinators must create strong, inter-personal networks with various actors involved in or impacted by a humanitarian response. There's no way to do that quickly. However, those countless hours spent drinking tea and eating biscuits can be the most valuable use of a coordinator's time.

## Procrastination

Procrastination masquerades in a million of different disguises. Among the more common of these are:

- "One more hour won't make any difference; I'll just put that off until this afternoon."
- "This drawer is a mess – it needs a good sorting out."
- "It won't matter if I'm a few minutes late; no one else will be on time."
- "I can't start on this report until I hear back from XYZ."

- “I always work best under pressure.”
- “I’ll just watch a few more minutes of the television.”

The wisest course of action, most of the time, would be; to simply do the unpleasant task as soon as is practical, while we have enough time to do the job right and get it over with, not prolonging our agony.

### What is Procrastination?

Procrastination is the action of delaying or postponing to do something that needs to get done. Procrastination can lead to feelings of guilt and self-doubt. It can also impact your effectiveness as a coordinator.

### Avoiding Procrastination

There are several things one can do to improve time management through avoiding procrastination:

- ✓ Establish priorities
- ✓ Set realistic goals
- ✓ Work to your strengths
- ✓ Identify past paths to success
- ✓ Compare your what you do with your perceptions of what you do
- ✓ Identify mental blocks to performing such as anxiety, indecisiveness and perfectionism.
- ✓ Eliminate or minimize noise and other distractions in your work environment
- ✓ Come prepared to work
- ✓ Approach tasks for short but intense periods
- ✓ Stay organized

But is procrastination always bad?

“There is a Latin expression *festina lente*, ‘make haste slowly.’ The Romans were not the only ancients to respect the act of voluntary omission. The Chinese thinker Lao Tzu coined the doctrine of *wu-wei*, ‘passive achievement.’

Few understand that procrastination is our natural defense, letting things take care of themselves...”

-Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Antifragile: Things that Gain from Disorder*