

Teaching People How To Use Your Time

By Ramona Creel

Teaching People How To Use Your Time

Ramona Creel
ramona@onlineorganizing.com

OnlineOrganizing.com <http://www.onlineorganizing.com>

I can't tell you how often I hear my friends, colleagues, and clients complain about how other people just don't RESPECT their time. You've probably experienced it too -- either at home or at work. People simply assuming that you are free to help out with a project or attend a meeting -- without even asking if you are available. Folks dropping by your home or your office to "chat" during your work hours, not giving a thought to the fact that you might be busy. Your kids expecting to be chauffeured from activity to activity all weekend long -- never once imagining that you might have other plans. And the advent of the cell phone, pager, fax, and e-mail have made it all even worse. So many of us feel like we have to drop everything and deal with each request as it comes in, lest we waste the other person's time by making them wait for a response. But what about our time? Isn't it just as important?

There is one hard truth out there that most people don't want to face -- you are responsible for the fact that other people either respect or don't respect your time. There is no one else to blame but yourself. You have to teach people how to use your time -- you have to be the one to set some boundaries about what is acceptable and what is not. The only reason that folks take advantage of you, expect too much from you, or don't respect your personal free time is that you have ALLOWED them to behave that way in the past. But if you draw a different line in the sand -- put develop some "time management ground rules" and stick to them -- you will be amazed at the change not only in yourself, but in the people around you.

SET ASIDE TIME FOR YOU

When we talk about scheduling "me time" into your calendar, most people think of an hour spent lounging in the bathtub or a weeklong retreat in which you re-discover your inner child. But time for yourself includes any time that you spend doing the things that keep you sane. For some people, that means time for exercise or meditation or an enjoyable hobby -- others might use their "me time" to work on a business project that they can't seem to fit into the regular 9 to 5 grind. My sister devotes much of her personal time remodeling -- which sounds way too much like work to me! But she'll take an entire week off at a time to "play with her house," because that's what makes her feel good and helps calm the craziness.

For my own personal sanity, I need to have one day a week in which I take care of what I call administrative work -- both business and personal. I might return phone calls, answer e-mails, pay bills, buy groceries, or clean house. Or I might choose to really dig into a writing or web project that I've been looking forward to. But I may also have a long phone conversation with a friend who lives 3000 miles away, go on an early morning bike ride, get my hair cut, attend a yoga class, have a

massage, or spend time working on mosaics. I consider my "admin time" a chance to reconnect with all the different areas of my life -- business, home, artistic, physical, social, and spiritual.

But the point is, whatever you enjoy doing with your "me time," treat it like it is sacred. I have actually marked off every Thursday for the rest of the year as my admin days (Thursdays are when my yoga class is scheduled). I have physically drawn a line through the entire day with the word "Admin" written across the top -- leaving me no room to write in any other appointments. And nothing short of a medical emergency (or a vacation!) is going to get me to give up those Thursdays. I often have a client ask me, "Can you get together on Thursday?" My answer is always, "No, I'm sorry but I'm not available that day." I can't tell you how long it took for me to become comfortable saying that! How dare I turn down an appointment with another person when I don't have anything else in my schedule that day?! Ah, but I do. I have an appointment with myself.

BALANCE YOUR FREE, FOCUS, AND BUFFER DAYS

I once read an article by a personal coach (and I apologize for not remembering the name!) who offered a very simple system for using your time in the most efficient way possible. He suggested that you break your schedule into "focus days," "free days," and "buffer days." "Focus days" are those in which you do whatever it is that brings home the bacon -- see clients, make sales calls, or (in the case of unpaid homemakers) manage your household. On those days, you do nothing but focus on your job. Then on "free days," you do no work at all -- not even checking your e-mail, returning a phone call, or putting in a load of laundry. You take that entire day to simply rest, relax, have fun, and recharge the old batteries. Finally, "buffer days" are for all of those little chores that have to be done, but don't really make you any money. That's the day for administrative work, personal errands, dentist appointments, trips to the library, etc.

I'll tell you, a number of things attracted me to this philosophy. First of all, it becomes incredibly easy to draw clear boundaries around your time. You are simply going to focus on one type of activity all day long -- no confusion and no waffling about what to do. If someone asks you to do work on a "free day" or do some mindless chore on a "focus day," you know the answer is "no," plain and simple. Second, it creates an automatic sense of balance between the many activities in your life, requiring you to spend some of your time at work and some at play. Third, you really do use your time more efficiently when you settle into one mindset for the entire day -- either work or play. It's the mental (and physical) switching of gears that slows us down, eats up so much of our time, and distracts us from really enjoying what we are doing at that moment.

Best of all, it's not a rigid system. You can label as many days in a week as "free" or "focus" or "buffer" as you need to, and you have the freedom to change a day's activities around at will. I've even broken it down further, counting my time before lunch as a "focus" period, and the time after lunch (when I'm sort of brain dead) as a "buffer" zone. Although you may not have total control over your schedule -- especially when you work a 9 to 5 job -- you can still apply these principles to your life, making weekdays "focus" days, setting aside one day a week for "buffer" activities, and saving at least one weekend day as "free."

LEARN HOW TO SAY "NO"

Tell me if this sounds familiar -- someone asks you to do something that you really don't want to do or you honestly don't have time for. It might be a church bake sale, a school fundraiser, participating on a committee, or even just working late. But you feel like you will let the other person down if you say no. You feel guilty already, and you haven't even turned them down yet! So you say, "Sure," even though doing so is going to put you under tremendous stress and pressure. You know that you will probably end up resenting this activity, and maybe even ducking some of your responsibilities because your heart's just not in it, but you go ahead and agree anyway.

Why are we so afraid to tell people "no"? For some reason, we have been taught that "no" is disrespectful -- and even insulting. We seem to value other people's time more than our own -- feeling that we need to bend over backward to accommodate others, even if it inconveniences us. I know we're atoning for the 1980's, but let's be reasonable! "No" is actually one of the healthiest words that can come out of your mouth. When you tell someone "no," you are really saying that you understand and accept your own limits, and don't want to do a shoddy job by overwhelming yourself. That you value your time and priorities and aren't willing to take away from the truly important things in your life. A little selfishness is necessary, if you want to maintain a balanced and sane life!

OFFER AN ALTERNATIVE

So how do you say "no" without insulting the other person, feeling consumed with guilt, or hurting your own credibility? We need to find a way to say "no" without dragging up all of those hidden fears -- they'll think I'm lazy or selfish, that I have no career drive, that I'm not ambitious, that I have no concern for other people. And it's time to give up all of those roles you're so proud of -- supermom, martyr, hero -- but are keeping you from finding true peace. Once you've accepted that you have the right (and often responsibility) to turn someone down, you can do it in a way that doesn't seem like a rejection.

The best way to tactfully dodge a request is to offer another alternative. If you can't do participate at this moment because you are too busy, but you would really like to help at a later time, say so. "I'm sorry, I can't do it right this minute -- but my schedule will be freed up by Friday afternoon, if you still need some help." Or you might suggest another, more appropriate resource. "I'm too busy to help you plan that meeting right now, but I have a friend who has been wanting to get involved. I'm sure she would love to participate. Let me give you her number." And finally, if you are asked to do a job that really doesn't interest you or is outside your area of expertise, offer to help with another task that is more suitable. "That's really not my strong suit -- but I would be happy to help out with (drawing posters, setting up the meeting room, working out a budget, etc.)" You will assuage your guilt, and feel as though you are still making a contribution, when you follow that "no" with a suggestion for getting the job done another way.

STOP CARRYING THE WORLD ON YOUR SHOULDERS

It can be incredibly difficult to accept the fact that you don't have to do everything yourself. Our society has conditioned us not only to think that we can do it all, but that we should do it all! People like to imagine themselves as indispensable -- falling prey to the "no one else can do it as well as I can" syndrome. We become unwilling to delegate jobs to other people, to ask for help, or to simply say, "I can't / am not going do that." Then we get overloaded, frustrated, and resentful of all of the responsibilities heaped on our backs -- even though we're the ones who said, "pile them on!"

But understand one thing -- as far as everyone else in the world is concerned, you are replaceable. I don't mean as a human being -- of course you are a unique individual and we would all miss you if you were gone. But I'm talking about the tasks you complete, the responsibilities you take on -- the favors you do for other people. If you can't do it, they'll find someone else. It's amazing how often we think, "If I don't do it, it won't get done." Yes it will -- if it really needs to be done in the first place. When I start to think that the world will stop turning if I don't check an item off of my "to-do" list, I always ask myself, "What if I got hit in the head with a tree tomorrow? How would this job get done?" When the answer is, "So-and-so would help out," I feel a lot more comfortable asking "so-and-so" to help out now (before I end up in the hospital in a coma!) If the answer is, "It wouldn't get done -- it's not that important," I think very hard about whether that task is even worth my time in the first place. It's amazing what a life and death situation (imagined or real!) will do for your perspective!

STICK TO YOUR GUNS

One final word of encouragement. It is going to be hard for you to set these kinds of boundaries in your life -- especially if you have been accustomed to letting other people dictate how you use your time. But it is a silent battle that is well worth fighting. And one might say that this fight is crucial to your survival in a crazy world with out-of-whack priorities about how we use our time. As you begin to reclaim your schedule, you will hear comments like, "Well you were always available to babysit at the last minute before" -- or, "You never had a problem with working on the weekends in the past." Your answer is simply, "My situation has changed. Sorry, but I can't do it this time." Period -- end of story. You do not have to explain yourself or justify why you are finally taking time to do the things you want to do. Understand that most folks out there believe that having no free time, feeling stressed and pressured, and giving up your entire life for others is simply the status quo. You will have to convert them by setting an example.

So if other people don't understand at first, they will when they begin to see the positive changes in your life. Suddenly, people will be asking, "How is it that you can have time for a hobby (or reading for pleasure or travel or spending a day at the park with your kids)? Can you tell me your secret?" And that's an amazing day -- because you get to help one more person regain control over his or her life. You are spreading the gospel of "setting boundaries" -- you touch one person and those people each touch one person and soon we have a society that's regained a sense of perspective about its priorities. Hallelujah!

You must include the following resource box when publishing this article:

Ramona Creel is a Professional Organizer and the founder of OnlineOrganizing.com -- a web-based one-stop shop offering everything that you need to get organized at home or at work. At OnlineOrganizing.com, you may get a referral to an organizer near you, shop for the latest organizing products, get tons of free tips, and even learn how to become a professional organizer or build your existing organizing business. And if you would like to read more articles about organizing your life or building your business, get a free subscription to the "Get Organized" and "Organized For A Living" newsletters. Please visit <http://www.onlineorganizing.com> or contact Ramona directly at <mailto:ramona@onlineorganizing.com> for more information.

[Get-Articles.com : 1000's of reprintable business and internet marketing-related articles.](#)

[Submit your article for reprint.](#)