



18 Minutes

Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done

by Peter Bregman
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Take-Aways

- You can't recover lost time, so don't waste it.
- Sometimes you must create a pause in your life to bring about meaningful change.
- Stop and think about where your life is going and about the goals you want to reach.
- Set up an annual plan with only three to seven main objectives.
- Create a daily schedule that features spending 18 minutes thoughtfully staying on track.
- This includes five minutes at the beginning of the day, one minute per working hour and five minutes at night.
- Break your activities down on a moment-by-moment basis. Have a to-do list and an "ignore" list.
- Set aside 95% of your day's time to work on your goals; use 5% for those tasks you can't avoid.
- Successful change involves "your strengths, weaknesses, differences and passions." Determine how those traits can work for you.
- Perfection and consistency can be obstacles to achievement. Aim for "good enough," and remain open to change.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
8	9	8	8

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) How to plan and manage your time by the minute, day and year, 2) Why a well-placed pause will move you forward, and 3) How 18 minutes a day can help you reach your goals.

Recommendation

Business consultant and blogger Peter Bregman writes from an entirely distinctive viewpoint in his self-help book on time management. Some of his delightfully irreverent concepts: Your weaknesses can be your strengths; achieving imperfection is always better than wasting time shooting for perfection; what you ignore doing is as important as what you do; and distractions actually can keep you on track. You will learn a lot from Bregman's idiosyncratic text, which presents his cheeky yet practical ideas with great aplomb and in small, delectable chapters that include many instructive case histories. *getAbstract* recommends Bregman's book to anyone who wants to get more out of each day and have some fun in the process.

Summary

Time Is Ticking Away

Your most precious asset is your time. Though you can recoup money, your career and your relationships, you can't recover your time once it is gone. So spend your time as productively and mindfully as possible. If not, you will end up asking yourself: "Where did that moment go?" as well as "Where did the day go?" and "Where did those years go?" If you fail to answer those questions soon enough to change your time management tactics, you'll be left wondering where your life went.

Don't spend your life racing around, trying to accomplish everything on your agenda. Accept that "it's impossible to get it all done." Instead, focus on your most important goals, and plan how you'll achieve them. Start by managing your year, then your days and finally your moments. Stop to take a look at your life, think about what to do differently and introduce the change you need. Make sure that you are on the right path all the time.

Pause

Often people need to take a step back from their lives to see where they are standing and where they are going. Take a tip from Google Earth and "hover above your world" to check if you're living the way you want to live. If not, do something about it. Take two steps: "Slow down" to reduce your "forward momentum," and then "start over" by asking yourself if you would still be on the same path if you could begin your life anew. Pausing to review your goals is vital to assessing how you spend your time, and taking a time-out can help you shape how you use each moment. For example, if someone angers you, don't respond immediately. Instead, take a breath and pause for a few seconds. This short gap allows your brain's prefrontal cortex, where logic resides, to gain control over your instinctively reactive and emotional amygdala.

Don't push yourself at a relentless pace without a break. As much as possible, follow a work schedule of "a few moderate days, one hard day and a day or two of complete rest." The breather enables you to recharge your batteries and to think. Always question your

"We start each day knowing we're not going to get it all done. And we look back on the years and wonder where they went and why we haven't accomplished what we had hoped."

"Who among us does not move through life with the hidden sense, maybe even quiet desperation, that we are destined for more?"

“Stepping away from your work might just be the key to increasing your productivity.”

“A year is lived one day at a time.”

“Manage your day hour by hour. Don’t let the hours manage you.”

“We try to be...available because we want to be helpful. And yet being overwhelmed with tasks – especially those we consider to be a waste of our time – is exactly what will make us unhelpful.”

assumptions, and never take anything for granted. Open your mind for change to occur. See yourself as the complete person you are; integrate your interests and roles outside of work into your identity. Become a fully accomplished individual away from the job. Acknowledge and honor your full potential.

Consider the courage of Susan Boyle, a middle-aged, unemployed woman from a tiny Scottish town who wowed the judges and audience when she sang on *Britain’s Got Talent*. Boyle took a chance because she believed in herself. Never settle for second best. Don’t let negative events bring you down and cause you to act out emotionally and against your own best interests. Instead, consider the results you want, and react accordingly.

“What Is This Year About?”

To help you discover what is important in your life, “find your focus.” Don’t worry if the path you must follow to attain your dream is not immediately clear. Mark Zuckerberg didn’t have today’s Facebook in mind when he and his college roommates started the social network. Similarly, Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin initially didn’t know how they would make money from their search engine. Like these entrepreneurs, experiment to find your way. Your “strengths, weaknesses, differences and passions” will have a lot to do with your success as you work to reshape your life. Start with a yearly plan to:

- **“Leverage your strengths”** – Find your edge, and play it to your advantage, just as the Oakland A’s baseball team did. They beat squads that paid their players twice what the A’s could afford. The A’s chose ballplayers based on different, but equally critical, skills and hired them for less. Determine your personal strengths, and use them to win.
- **“Embrace your weaknesses”** – Use your weaknesses and personal strengths to reach your goals. If you are a tightwad, use that predilection to run your business in a frugal way. Powerful people “don’t conquer their dysfunctions, quirks and potentially embarrassing insecurities. They seamlessly integrate them to make an impact.”
- **“Assert your differences”** – Most people work hard to think, look and act like everyone else, but that’s a huge mistake. In today’s highly competitive world, you need to show what makes you special, and not how you are the same. Take the New York City pedicab driver who stays busy during the coldest winter days when his competitors cannot line up a fare. His secret: a sign that reads “heated seat.” Latch onto whatever distinguishes you, and capitalize on it to stand out from the crowd. It’s not enough to offer passengers a heated seat – you need to post a sign that proclaims your distinctive edge.
- **“Pursue your passion”** – In 2009, airline pilot C. B. Sullenberger became an instant hero when he successfully landed a malfunctioning passenger jet in the middle of New York City’s Hudson River. Those who know Sullenberger well were not surprised. He has spent his entire life focused on planes and flying, and his primary leisure activity is piloting gliders (experience that came in handy when Sullenberger glided his huge, damaged plane onto the Hudson and saved his 155 passengers). Whatever your passion, devote as much time to it as possible. Focus less on what you should do and more on what you want to do. If you’re enthusiastic, hard work won’t faze you, and the ability to persevere in the face of obstacles will come to you more easily.

As you plan your year, don’t make things too complicated. Think about your life as a buffet: You’re tempted to try a little of everything, but if you do, you end up uncomfortable and regretful. If you select just five items, you can really enjoy them.

“Our to-do list has become more of a guilt list. An inventory of everything we want to do, plan to do, think we should do, but never get to. More like an I’m-never-going-to-get-to-it list.”

“People do what they choose to do. And if something’s fun, they’ll choose to do it.”

“The most important skill we can learn is the skill of mastering distraction.”

“Fear can be a useful catalyst to change – then pleasure sustains it...don’t choose one or the other. Choose one before the other.”

Similarly, concentrate on no more than seven goals – or as few as three – during your year. Devote 95% of your time and attention to these areas. Allocate the other 5% to those unplanned activities that you cannot avoid. Don’t let that percentage grow; if it gets up to 20%, you are seriously off track. That won’t happen if you stay in touch with what you want most out of life.

“What Is This Day About?”

Planning your year is a relatively straightforward process, but planning your day is a far different exercise. So much can come along to interrupt your scheduled activities. Resolve in advance, with careful planning, to “get the right things done.” Just as a driver needs to look farther down the road to get to a destination, so, too, should you keep your goals right in front of you.

Prepare how you will spend your day by following your annual plan: Allocate 95% of your day to your three to seven objectives. Imagine you have “five boxes” and each one holds a written goal. Create a to-do list that advances just those goals for the day. Set up a separate list – or a sixth box – for the 5% of your day that tackles your administrative or personal activities. This is your new system, based on a “six-box to-do list.” Schedule the toughest jobs in the morning when you are sharpest, and leave the 5% tasks for the afternoon. Be precise; decide when and where to handle each item. Include an “ignore list” of time wasters to avoid.

Invariably, your agenda will always be chock-full. To avoid making longer and longer to-do lists, keep each item on your list for only three days. After that, either: “do it immediately, schedule it, let it go” or put it in a “someday/maybe” file that you consult and amend monthly. In the course of your day, don’t let events or people overwhelm you. Set an automatic alarm to go off every hour. When it does, take a minute to ask yourself if you are moving ahead correctly on your schedule, and to think about what you will do during the next hour. To manage your day for maximum efficiency, implement this “18-minute plan” as a daily ritual:

- In the morning, take five minutes to review your to-do list and to consider what you want to accomplish that day.
- Every hour when you’re on the job, your alarm should sound. Right away spend a minute thinking about where you are and where you need to be to meet your daily goals. This process will take eight minutes in an eight-hour workday.
- At night, set aside five minutes to examine how your day went, what happened and what you learned from it.

“What Is This Moment About?”

You can have the greatest annual and daily plans in the world, but interruptions, distractions and your own procrastination can prevent you from reaching your goals. “Mastering your initiative” means finding ways to stay motivated and on the right path. Start by setting up your workspace and environment in ways that facilitate what you want to achieve. For example, teachers who want to encourage classroom discussion simply arrange their students’ seats in a circle. Find the fun in your day to keep you going. Or, use fear as a good short-run motivator: Think about the dire consequences of, say, missing an important deadline. After scaring yourself, turn to positive thoughts about what your future will be like when you meet your target.

“Mastering your boundaries” will help you reduce or eliminate interruptions and

“You’ll always work tirelessly at your passions – hard work will feel easier.”

“So often we scramble to get a lot accomplished in a day, and succeed – only to realize, in retrospect, that those things we accomplished won’t get us where we want to go.”

“If you really want to get something done, decide when and where you are going to do it.”

“It’s impossible to get it all done. And it’s dangerous to try.”

distractions. When someone wants you to collaborate on work you had not originally planned to do, stop and ask yourself: “Am I the right person” to help with this? “Is this the right time?” And, “Do I have enough information?” Politely decline if no is the answer to even one of these questions. Establish firm, clear rules to govern your work routine and how you handle interruptions; don’t violate them – ever. Make sure that everyone knows your no always means no. Use the “rule of three” to know when to challenge others’ comments or behaviors. For example, if an employee is late once, ignore it; twice, note it; three times, bring it to his or her attention.

“Mastering yourself” takes time, energy and, sometimes, counterintuitive strategies. Distractions can have a positive effect when you want to avoid something. For instance, if you’re dieting, don’t focus on food; distract yourself with a good book or movie. On the job, keep worries at bay by taking a short walk outside or giving your accomplishments a fresh look. Avoid multitasking, which is really “switch-tasking,” that is, counterproductively going back and forth from one activity to another but achieving less and less.

Forget Perfection

People think they need to be flawless all the time, but “the world doesn’t reward perfection. It rewards productivity.” Exactitude can keep you from achieving; take three steps to overcome your predilection for perfection:

1. When starting any project, never try for perfection; instead, just get the ball rolling, one item, task or thought at a time.
2. “Good enough” can be perfectly adequate; find the standard that satisfies you.
3. Be careful about the people – “friends, co-workers and bosses” – with whom you associate. They can say and do things to hurt you and impede your progress.

When you think about it, nothing is perfect, and for good reason. What is perfect for one person is not for someone else. Large groups of people don’t have a single standard for what’s perfect and what isn’t because individuals all have their own idea of perfection. So “don’t settle for imperfect. Shoot for it.” To end up with the best possible outcome, make or propose something flawed, incomplete or limited, and ask people how they would adapt it to suit their needs.

Blind consistency can be as much of an obstacle as perfection. The world and everything in it is in constant flux, yet people persist in doing things the same way they always do them. Be prepared to alter your stance amid shifting circumstances, but before you act, ask yourself, “What’s the situation?” Also ask, “Who else is involved?” and “How can I help?” Opt for ideas that make the best use of your strengths, weaknesses, differences and passions. See change not as a problem or distraction but as a chance to adapt and grow.

Don’t try to institute all these suggestions at the same time. Keep it simple. To begin your personal change program, select one new behavior that will provide the most notable impact and concentrate on that. Make sure it works for you. After this change becomes a habit, incorporate additional ideas into your repertoire. Begin today. Time’s a-wasting.

About the Author

Peter Bregman is the founder of Bregman Partners, a global management consultancy. He also wrote *Point B: A Short Guide to Leading a Big Change* and is the co-author of five other books.