

Forward: Thinking Through Time

by Mary Elizabeth Ambery

If you're like me, you've learned that we are "still learning" to be leaders. This means that we make mistakes *and* we seek correction. We recognize the delicate balance between sustaining and changing operations through corrections, whether welcome or daunting. In any event, correction means change and change takes time. We may think of time as a measure,

a constant, a variable, even a dimension. How we negotiate our daily (or yearly) schedules reveals how we think about time, value it, and use it.

How we use time, like our leadership, is never perfect. And that's okay because we are "still learning." Through our continual efforts to do our best, we may embrace the wisdom of our 30th President of the United States, Calvin Coolidge: "Nothing in this world can take

the place of persistence." We make decision after decision that insistently leads us and others into challenges and accomplishments, and yes, into more decisions! Our thinking about time and acting through its gates enables us to lead with intelligence and confidence.

Time's gate

Timing our decisions and actions is under our control entirely. In whatever way we exercise this control, when we make a decision or take action to involve ourselves in a situation or event, we must pass through a gate — time's gate, which forces us to accept time as an essential component of our plans. The moment we make a decision and pass through time's gate, time may seem to be closing in behind us or stretching out before us.

As educational leaders, regardless of our roles as business owners, center directors, school principals, or teachers, we are expected to be organized, sensitive, and unflappable. We are expected to be successful in our job performance. We are expected to manage ourselves and encourage others to work cooperatively. (You remember "cooperative play," right?) We are expected to cultivate an environment that supports individuality *and* alliance, independence *and* teamwork, initiative *and* closure.

We are a group that takes these expectations seriously. We work conscientiously, sometimes joyfully, to tend our programs and people. Often, we juggle myriad issues, such as budget cutbacks ("I hope I mailed that grant proposal last month!"), job satisfaction ("How many days *will* you need to get your wisdom teeth pulled?"), workplace conflict ("Who's going to work on the holiday? Past closing?"), or program development ("Does everybody have their in-service hours planned or completed for the year?") All these matters share a common gate: TIME.

Strategic timing

How do we *plan* to spend our time? How *do* we spend our time? Admittedly, the answers are often different. Closing the distance between the two is not impossible. In fact, closing the distance is what makes us effective. We can learn much from people like Peter F. Drucker (often regarded as the "founding father of the study of management," and awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, 2002) who offers advice about work and time. He says, "Efficiency is doing things right; effectiveness is doing the right things." And, he advises that "Time is the scarcest resource and unless it is managed nothing else can be managed." So, deciding what we choose to do and when are key to our success — our success in achieving program goals, promoting staff excellence, or providing family and

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community appreciation. In order to be effective, we need a strategy, a plan.

Time to plan: The *yes or no* method

All businesses and successful people plan. They plan daily, short term, and long term projects or events. They even plan for urgent or crises events. They do what you do every day: They think; they say *yes*; and they say *no*. Ultimately, *you* choose to say *yes* or *no* to plan each of the events on your schedule. Each *yes* or *no* decision is based on all the information you have at the time you plan. This either/or way of thinking is something our brains have been doing a long time. When in doubt, plan first, cross out later. No nonsense planning can be as easy as 1, 2, 3.

Thinking and planning. When you *think* about it, thinking and planning are inseparable. If you can think it, you can plan it.

1. Select the most comfortable planning device for *you*:
 - A desk or pocket planner book
 - A computer software planner
 - An Internet planner

Say *yes* to a planning device!

2. Enter the typical and recurring primary — absolutely, positively can't-forget — events on each page of the planner. Start by completing at least three months; continue entering your information for the year during the next week. (You are using your time strategically when you use your time to plan.) Each item below carries equal importance:
 - Daily events or tasks
 - Critical appointments
 - Singular events for which you are responsible
 - Short term projects
 - Long term projects
 - Personally essential events*

This is *your* planner; it is unique and it is not written in stone. You can change it, add

to it, move events to the next day, or cross out events. Changing your schedule takes far less energy than your initial planning of it. (As you log the events, you may be reminded that certain ones recur monthly or annually. Mark the recurring events and project events with distinct symbols of your choice. Certain entries should be designated as personal while others should be designated as work-related. Later, you can “lift” these recurring and work-related entries from your planner and copy them to project or recurring calendars for you and your staff. More strategic planning!)

* Personally essential events are as important to your schedule as your work tasks because they nourish your mind and your heart. These include such items as your community volunteering; a child's piano recital or grandfather's retirement celebration; your physical exam or quiet reflection time; and similar family, health, or religious commitments.

Say *yes* to continual planning!

3. Review your schedule for overlapped or impossibly-tight scheduled events. Say, *no* to overlapping and impossibly-tight scheduling. Our jobs require us to be alert and calm; eliminate the stress of these time errors the same way you handle any other mistake — correct it and revise your plan (including personally essential events*).

Say *yes* to review and revise!

Time to work: The *yes or no* method

Your job dictates many events in your schedule, others are selected by you. Because we are in a helping profession, we often say *yes* to jobs when our schedule and energies are already taxed. We typically say *yes* for good reasons — we care about others; we believe it is our duty; or we think we can achieve results more quickly or achieve better results if we do it ourselves. In order to perform at our best, to lead with confidence and

intelligence, we must select and pass through numerous time gates to achieve a series of unfolding goals.

Connecting our responsibilities of routine operation, staffing, enrolling, licensing, accreditation, purchasing, maintenance, teaching, and problem-solving is the complex commitment of caring the people with whom we work and those we serve. Our caring influences what we choose to do when. Prioritizing and caring might seem odd partners at first glance. Necessarily, when we order tasks, we may place one person's needs before another. In doing so, we place a value of importance on each. Prioritizing affords us two benefits: We use our energy on what matters most, and we can explain to others why we do what we do.

One of the easiest ways to prioritize is to sort tasks into *yes* and *no* categories. The *yes* category can be sorted further by rating importance and urgency, again with *yes* or *no* labels. The *no* category can be sorted further by urgency and assignment of future times for closure.

Thinking and working. When we plan our work, we never know what might interrupt us. Donald Wetmore, PhD, President of the Productivity Institute in Stanford, Connecticut, explains that competing demands on our time can be harnessed with prioritizing. Again, as in most decisions, prioritizing can be reduced to a series of *yes* or *no* responses to demands. When (not if) interruptions occur — telephone calls, visitors, e-mail, urgent meetings, clear thinking comes to the rescue! And, the *yes or no* method, with a little more sorting, can help us adjust our schedule.

Imagine that it is Friday afternoon. You are in the middle of planning for a health screening to be done by a new professional group in your community. Your arrangements by phone and e-mail need to be completed this afternoon, before the upcoming holiday break next week. You've been working on this for several

days and interruptions have plagued your week. Suddenly, Jerry, an assistant teacher, comes into your office to tell you that the Daisy Book Club representative “dropped in” to see you about the book festival starting the Monday after break. Jerry explains, “This is the rep’s last stop before she leaves for her two week vacation and she needs to finalize paperwork and plans, *now*, or she can’t deliver on the festival.” What do you do?

Your job is to say *yes* to one of the two tasks before you — health screening or book club arrangements. The task to which you say *yes* will capture your attention, while, in this case, the task to which you say *no* will be delayed. In this case, saying *no* does not mean that you do not care or that you care less about that event. When you plan for present and future events, you send a message that you care enough and value the event or task enough to spend adequate time, the time to be successful, on that job.

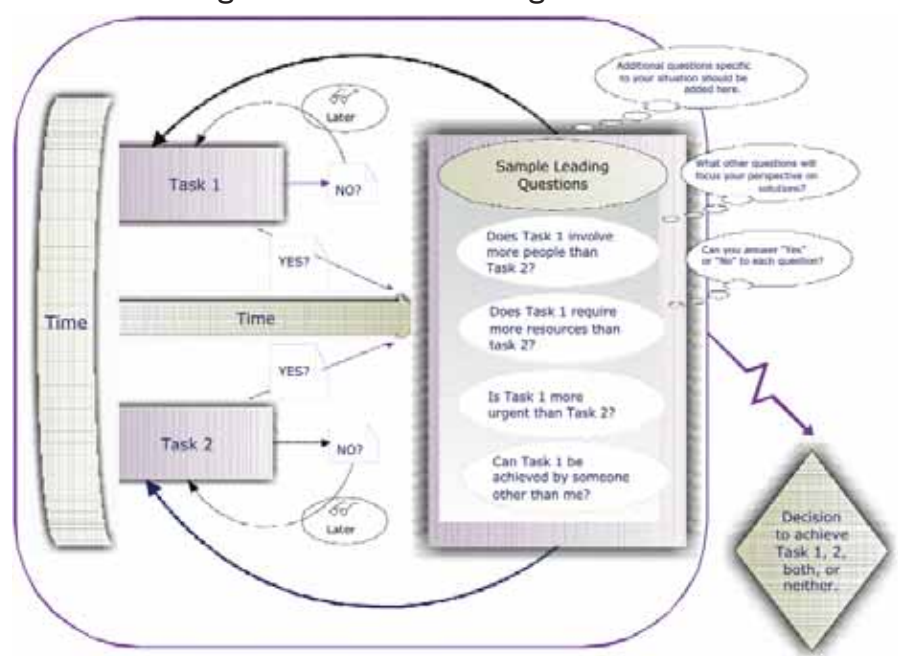
Thinking and leading with time. Knowing your team — your staff, families, volunteers, yourself, and where the talent lies, enables you to make informed decisions about who can help you do what needs to be done, when it matters most. When events or tasks pop up, immediately use the *yes or no method* to sort tasks, and say *yes* to asking for team cooperation:

- Ask yourself if the task belongs in the *yes* or the *no* category.
 - + If *yes*, ask yourself if a member or members of your team can handle the task.
 - If *yes*, delegate!
 - If *no*, take the job yourself or revise your schedule for future action.

When you make a decision to lead through the gates of *your* time management, you encourage others to evaluate their priorities and exercise their use of time.

Timing is critical to sustaining the rhythm of your work, the effectiveness of each team

Figure 1: Decision-making Flow Chart



Using Yes/No Questions to Prioritize Tasks. This flow chart shows the influence of time on the process of decision making. In the event we encounter two competing tasks, ask a series of leading *yes/no* questions about the two tasks. Logically, this will reduce the available options until it becomes clear whether or not to undertake the task immediately. If the answer is *no*, that is, to not undertake the task, the task awaits a later decision. Ultimately, each task will fall into a *yes* or *no* category.

member’s role. Asking your team for help sends a powerful message that you depend on and trust them. Your effective use of time is reflected in your daily accomplishments. Your effective use of time is reflected in your values. Your effective use of time is reflected in team cooperation and shared success. And, isn’t that what leadership is all about?

Read more about it

These web sites offer abundant resources on personal and professional time management:

- American Management Association
www.amanet.org
- Exchange offers over 200 articles addressing time management and related issues
www.childcareexchange.com
- Dale Carnegie and Associates, Inc.
www.DaleCarnegie.com
- Mindjet Corporation
www.mindjet.com

These web sites offer a historical or scientific view of time:

- National Institutes of Standards and Technology
www.physics.nist.gov
click on Time and Frequency, then on A Walk through Time for a historical perspective

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy provides numerous articles on the concept and value of time
plato.stanford.edu

- Print articles of interest include:
- Henke, W., Parish, T. S., & Dopp, A. (2006). The time management checklist. *International Journal of Reality Therapy*; 26(1), 45.
 - Hyytinen, A., & Ruuskanen, O. (2007). Time use of the self-employed. United Kingdom. *Kyklos*, 60(1), 105-22.
 - Robertson, P. J. (2006). How principals manage their time. *Principal*, 86,(2), 12-16.

Yes, No, Maybe so: What do you do? To practice using the yes/no method of decision making, read the six mini-scenarios. Try to imagine yourself in these situations with your current set of personal resources. Refer to the questions provided in this article to help you decide what to do.

■ Peggy and Karen, two experienced lead teachers, have applied for a grant to bring local musicians and dancers to the school for workshops with the staff and demonstration sessions with the children. They come to you on Monday afternoon and ask you to look at their work. In your quick reading, you notice that their ideas are good but that they have not adequately answered most of the grant's questions, and their writing has many grammatical errors. The deadline for submission is Wednesday at 5:00 p.m. Competing with their expectation for approval and/or help is your current over-time commitment on Family Week. This is the school's week-long open house that will showcase the new arts equipment and materials paid for with Parent Organization funds, host culturally-themed pot-luck dinners each night, and serve as an enrollment-expansion announcement to the community. *What do you do?*

■ You are on the phone speaking to a parent about her concerns about moving her soon-to-be three-year-old son into the three-year-old room. She explains that Joey will turn three next week and this is the week she is expecting her new baby boy. Joey is already having problems and tries to hide any baby items he discovers. She begs that the change will be too much. With her husband in Iraq, she knows that Joey will be even "worse" when the baby arrives. Then, she starts to cry, and Kipp, the Toddler Room assistant teacher, bursts through your partially opened door and says, "Oh, sorry! Well, anyway, you have to come outside because Fitzie's gone missing. She was playing by the bird bath. We can't find her anywhere!" *What do you do?*

■ You walk into the laundry room next to the kitchen and notice that the lid is closed on the washing machine indicating that that wash is finished but has not yet been put into the dryer. Knowing that "many hands make light work," you decide to complete the job. When you reach in, you find the laundry still floating in several inches of water. Further investigation reveals the washing machine has been unplugged, and there is water running on the floor next to the wall. To top things off you notice that the laundry is all the infant bedding due to a head lice incident earlier in the day. Naptime is a mere 15 minutes away. At this moment, Jeanie, your secretary, peeks her head around the corner and says, "Marjorie is here, you know, from the Health Department. She's wondering if she can just get started." *What do you do?*

■ You are committed to working for the Red Cross each year during their blood drive. You are on your 22nd year without missing a drive. This Thursday is your day. You will stop into work at 7:30 a.m., leave at 8:15 to make the commute so that you will be on time at 9:00. It is Wednesday, 10:00 p.m. when the phone rings at your house. Mitch, one of your assistant teachers is on the phone and explains that he will not be in because he thinks he has a stomach flu. Within 20 minutes, two lead teachers and another assistant call with the same issue. This is followed up at 11:00 p.m. with an apology from your secretary that she can't make it to work tomorrow because she is sick. Your safety net for teacher coverage has evaporated. *What do you do?*

■ Your mother calls to tell you that she has just been accepted into graduate school. She is thrilled. She would like you to meet her around noon at the college where she will be having lunch with one of the professors who remembers you from your undergraduate program — it is your mentor. She is back from Ecuador and is in town for only the day. You check your calendar: You have a doctor's appointment at 1:30 p.m. that you have had scheduled for four months. You can't miss it. At 10:30 a.m., you have an appointment with two volunteers, a carpenter, and a roofer to complete plans on the playground shelter. It's the Friday before a long holiday weekend (Monday off) and traffic may be dicey. *What do you do?*

■ You are sitting in your office looking at your planner for the last month and the next. You are proud of the fact that you have almost everything under reasonable control — your project deadlines are clearly marked, you made it through tax season, you mailed the right birthday gifts to the right siblings in time for their special celebrations, and you have a small wait-list for your center. You go through your mail from yesterday afternoon and find a request from a nearby school to teach six Saturday morning workshops in your specialty area. The sessions will start in two weeks. To make this offer more attractive, they are offering a modest stipend. You call and accept the offer. The phone rings. Do you answer it? Yes, of course; it's 9:15 a.m. Christina, the director of a new center in town, asks if you will start a "Directors Group" for all directors in the area and lead the group. Several of her colleagues have been talking about how valuable this would be and decided you would be perfect to lead it. You tell her this sounds interesting and will definitely get back to her this week. You open your e-mail. Your friend, Jayne, writes to remind you that the state conference is just around the corner and will be held in her city. "What luck," she writes, "you can stay with me! We'll be able to present our Saturday workshop with all the resources we need because we can just load them into the back of my car. Make your travel reservations, now. See you soon!" *What do you do?*

In each of these scenarios, how did you think through time? Did you say yes or no to tasks that required many resources? Did you say yes or no to challenging circumstances? Did you assess urgency? Our relationships, obligations, and missions influence our consideration of time management challenges. When we use our schedules to focus our spirit and define our intentions, we demonstrate what it means to lead, to move forward, thinking through time.