11. ACCOMMODATING YOURSELF AND OTHER PEOPLE

SOMETIMES THE WAY you use your time is bound to make others unhappy. Everybody likes attention. Giving each person the attention he wants takes time. And you can't satisfy all of the people all of the time. If you've decided it's a C to attend all the parents' meetings at your daughter's school, you can expect her to be disappointed when you don't go. If you've decided to give up your weekly tennis game because it's no longer fun, you can expect your partner to be disgruntled. If you've decided it's no longer worth your time to keep training an employee who doesn't seem to be catching on, you can expect him to be upset when you get rid of him. If you postpone delivery of Jones' order to satisfy an emergency request from the Smith Co., you can expect Jones to be annoyed or apoplectic, and this time you might even lose Jones' business for good.

It's a real dilemma whether or not to put aside an A of your own when asked to do something else. It might take a lot less time to do what is a C for you but an A for someone important to you—perhaps your spouse or your boss—than it would take to explain why you don't consider the demand very urgent. On the other hand, you don't always want to do other people's A's at the expense of your own.

You can never do everything that everyone wants—there just isn't time. You must set priorities based on the importance to you of the person doing the asking and the consequences if you don't do what's being asked. If the person doing the asking, or what is being asked, is unimportant to you, you may choose to defer the request (at least the first time around). Some of these requests for action that come your way are soon forgotten or downgraded to C's by the asker and don't have to be done at all.

Learn to Say "No"

Sometimes the best solution is to say "No" at the outset. This one word, used promptly, properly and with courtesy, can save you a great deal of time. It's important not to let other people fritter away your time, but when you say "No" you have to make it stick while not seeming ruthless or unfair. And everybody knows how hard that is.

You can tell the other person that you appreciate how important the activity is to him but you are too busy to help him out now. If it makes you feel better, apologize and mention one or two of the A's that pre-empt your attention. Perhaps he will see it from your point of view. He might even apologize to you for intruding on your time.

Some people have a great deal of trouble saying "No." A client of mine, Ms. Filmore, found that she was spending most of her time on other people's priorities. When we looked at the situation together, it was clear to us both that she was saying "Yes" because she was afraid to stand up for her own priorities. Perhaps her trouble stemmed from childhood. Her domineering parents had always limited her actions and told her not only what to do, but when to do it.

As we talked she began to see that her reluctance to say "No" wasn't really fair to others. She realized that she would say "Yes" when there was little hope of her actually doing what was asked. In one instance, she disappointed a very important person who would have made other arrangements if he'd suspected that a "Yes" from Ms. Fillmore meant "Maybe." The realization that saying "Yes," and not delivering, was worse for all concerned than saying "No," helped her solve her problem.

There are other ways besides Ms. Fillmore's to avoid saying "No." The administrative assistant who vows to fulfill a request "Right away" (whether he intends to or not), the colleague who offers sympathy when action is needed, and the mailroom clerk who claims never to have received your request in the first place, are all wasting your time and theirs because they have not learned to say "No." To do this is sim-

ply poor ethics, poor business, poor personal relations, and it can make life harder for everyone in the future.

Compromises that Work

What can you do if the person doing the asking is your spouse, your boss, your child, your parent, or your best friend and you don't feel you can out-and-out say "No"? You can often satisfy other people and still not completely sacrifice your own priorities if you look for compromises.

When another person asks you to do something for him right away, he may well be more interested in speed than perfection. If you feel his demands on your time are reasonable, look for short-cuts. If your boss unexpectedly asks for a quick report on the month's sales, chances are he'll settle for a brief survey provided he gets it right away. If your daughter asks you on short notice to make her a new dress for a party, propose a quickly-made skirt instead.

Other people may habitually turn to you for particular tasks because you have, in effect, trained them to do so. Maybe it used to be your A to pack the family's lunches, but now that the kids are older, you've found an interesting selling job. You'll have to wean them away from having mother do it, perhaps by rotating the responsibility for preparing lunch. In business, you could encourage a demanding customer to go directly to the service department instead of depending on you for help, by explaining that his requests will be handled with greater speed.

Another solution to conflicting priorities (his A, your C) is discussion. If you feel harassed at home, try sitting down with your husband and listing your respective household duties. This will put into perspective how much you are already doing, and perhaps he'll see that all the demands on your time are unreasonable. This may never have occurred to him before, and you can adjust your duties to free more time for your A's.

When you are working in a cooperative effort with an associate, start by reviewing your To Do List and his. Look for those items which you both agree have high priority. Then try to enlarge the area of agreement by examining those items to which you have assigned different priorities. Express

your point of view, and try to convince him that what he thought was an A is really a C. Listen to him, too, and try to understand his viewpoint. Be prepared to change your own assessment of the priorities if he can make a convincing case that what you called a C is really an A.

When agreement cannot be reached, trade-offs are a good idea. In return for doing his A (although it is of little value to you), ask that he do one of your A's. This also works well in reverse: "I won't ask you to do this if you don't ask me to do that" isn't childish; it can be a handy way to rid yourself of time-consuming C's by simple exchange.

Time-Sharing

When there are several people competing for your time and attention, some system that is fair to everyone generally works best. Sally of the steno pool, with half a dozen "bosses," does the work given to her in the order received. If Mr. Bracken has a special rush job, it gets immediate attention. If two people in the office need their work "right away," she can't satisfy both demands. But she can set her own priorities, point out the conflict and let them fight it out, or go to her supervisor for a decision.

Time-sharing, as fairness, can be particularly important to children, who will often compete for the time and attention of parents. For example, at our dinner table there is one seat—the one closest to my wife and me—that each of our children prefers. We'd like to have all our children sit next to us all the time but that's a physical impossibility. In the interest of fair play, we rotate the seat by using a simple numerical system, taking the day of the month and dividing it by three. If there's no remainder, it's our youngest child David's turn; if there's a remainder of one, our middle child Diane gets the seat; and if there's a remainder of two, the seat goes to Carol, the eldest.

At bedtime we use a different solution that assures each child an equal share of attention. Fortunately they go to bed at different times. My wife sets a timer, and just before bedtime, each child receives fifteen minutes of undivided parental attention to use in any way he or she wants.

Whichever of the many strategies you adopt to keep other

people's requests from swamping you, it pays to be gracious. And if you make a special effort to be considerate of other people and their time, they will be likely to respect you and your time.

And isn't that what you want—time to do your thing?

12. HOW TO CREATE QUIET TIME FOR YOURSELF

So YOU HAVE blocked out time on your calendar for heavy thinking. Now the question is: Will you be left alone so you can really concentrate? As any office worker knows, just because you decide you want to be alone doesn't mean that visitors and telephone calls will magically stop intruding. Furthermore, are you sure you really want everybody to stay away from you? Most people need to be in touch with other people to conduct their business. The point is that there are ways to regulate this traffic.

"Do you have a minute?" usually means "May I have your attention now to talk about something that will take an unspecified length of time?" So the next time someone asks, "Do you have a minute?" you might say, "Can we really do it in a minute?" or "Sure, I have a minute now, but if it takes longger we'll have to do it later."

Who is doing all the interrupting in the first place? Are they mostly V.U.P.'s (Very Unimportant Persons)? It pays to find out. The first thing to do, if interruptions are a problem, is keep a log of all telephone calls and visitors. Mr. Jackson, the director of a non-profit foundation, kept such a log for a week. It showed whether these time-snatchers were scheduled, who they were, and what they wanted. When he reviewed the log he found that the 80/20 rule applied. Eighty percent of his interruptions were coming from 20 percent of the interrupters. And by far most of the interruptions were coming from two people: an assistant and another subordinate.

This kind of traffic is easy to regulate, as I'll show you shortly. But even if your boss is in the habit of calling you into his office in the morning and wipes out your lovingly polished time plan by giving you an unexpected assignment that takes most of the day, you needn't commit harakiri. Try these ideas instead:

Encourage your boss to warn you about such tasks the day before, if at all possible, so that you may plan your time more realistically—not only for your benefit but for his. Is your boss (or client) giving unnecessary priority to tasks that could be adequately handled on a scheduled, non-rush basis, and might you point this out tactfully?

It's also worth asking yourself whether your boss is in the habit of turning to you for this type of assignment because you have in effect trained him to do so. If so, try being a bit less available, or delegate others to handle it instead. The same goes for a demanding customer. If the situation warrants, you may benefit from encouraging him to call the service department or some other person instead of always depending on you.

Mr. Jackson's case presented no great problem. He worked out a schedule with his assistant to see him at three scheduled times during the day: 9:30, 1:30, and 3:30. His assistant was to save all business for those times, except for the most urgent emergencies. The assistant had gotten into the habit of jumping up and rushing into Mr. Jackson's office like a fireman whenever anything came up. In the future he was never to interrupt Mr. Jackson unless convinced his mission was an A-item.

The other subordinate presented a different problem. This man, Anderson, was insecure in his job. In order to function, he needed continual reassurance that he was doing everything right. He was constantly bothering Mr. Jackson with a stream of low-priority (vague, but urgent-sounding) matters that he pressured Mr. Jackson to do right away. Also, Anderson was overdependent and unable to make a decision on his own. He insisted on droning through all the details even when Mr. Jackson didn't need them to make a choice.

On balance, though, Anderson had done good work, and Mr. Jackson had never wanted to hurt his feelings by telling him to stop bugging him with trivia. Now Mr. Jackson decided that Anderson's milquetoastish ways were a luxury he could no longer afford. Either Anderson would have to get along better on his own or he could be replaced by someone who didn't require so much of Mr. Jackson's time. Much as he liked Anderson, Jackson couldn't afford the time that he cost. Eventually Anderson was transferred to another depart-

ment where he felt more secure, though the work was not as challenging.

The log kept by Mr. Frank, another executive, revealed a different pattern. Every two minutes or so he was interrupted by one of his many staff members. His solution was to reorganize, delegate more responsibility to his supervisors, and encourage his employees to look to the supervisors for answers to questions. He established weekly staff meetings, because his log revealed that several people were asking him for information requiring coordination with others. Mr. Frank also started sending background memos to the entire staff on routine matters, since lack of information was creating unnecessary interruptions of his work.

When the Interrupter is a Four-Year-Old

Ms. Jones didn't need a log to tell her that her day was being constantly interrupted by her four-year-old daughter, Melinda. When Ms. Jones wanted to find time to finish an exciting novel, she went into the bedroom, closed the door, and began reading. Within two minutes Melinda was on Mommy's lap. Disappointed, Ms. Jones consoled herself with the thought that Melinda would grow up better-adjusted for having had her mother's attention in her formative years, and went back to dreaming of next year, when Melinda would start a half day of kindergarten and Mommy would have all that time to herself.

Ms. Jones finally decided Melinda could be just as well-adjusted if she had her mother's wholehearted attention only some of the time instead of the half-hearted attention that is all any adult can muster when a child is watched without letup. After all, if Ms. Jones was in a better humor during her time with Melinda, she was sure to be a happier and more creative mother.

One day she got the courage to put a latch on the bedroom door, set the kitchen timer for thirty minutes, and told Melinda that she was going into her room to read for half an hour. She promised to play Fish when the timer bell went off. Melinda was to play in her room until it did.

You can't imagine the wailing and screams that Melinda produced from her side of the bedroom door, but Ms. Jones

steeled herself and kept the door closed. She didn't get any reading done that first day because she was too anxious about the effect her experiment would have on Melinda, but she set the time for thirty minutes at 10:30 each day that week. By the end of the week Melinda seemed to have adjusted to the new system and played quietly in her room while Ms. Jones not only finished her novel but was halfway through a second one.

Contact Time vs. Thinking Time

If your log reveals that 80 percent of your interruptions are from new and/or different people, you obviously can't solve the problem by talking to the key interrupters. If your job involves a great deal of public contact, you'd best answer the phone or see the caller. But if you usually perform two roles, one requiring public contact and the other thinking alone, then you need some way to balance the demands of the two roles so that the contact role doesn't interrupt the thinking role to death.

Although he kept telling himself the new revision of his billing system was important, every time a visitor came his way Mr. Bean took time out to talk to him—even when it was a trivial matter that could have been handled by a subordinate.

Mr. Bean knew that the system revision was the big A-1, and he felt bad each evening when he went home after spending little time on it. He blamed the constant interruptions. The truth was that Mr. Bean blew hot and cold on interruptions. Sometimes he sought them out; at other times he resented even the important ones. When he was interrupted in the middle of an intricate part of the revision plan he was annoyed. Even if a very big customer was on the phone, Mr. Bean didn't think, "That's my job calling." Instead, he shrugged and fumed, "How can I get my work done?"

Mr. Bean's solution to the problem of conflicting job functions was to alternate between them, to the detriment of both. Was there a better way?

Mr. Bean contemplated not answering the phone and refusing to see visitors. This would give him time to think, and the system revision would probably get done nicely. But then what were the risks in not being available? He might offend

other people who would want and expect to talk to him. His staff might fail to coordinate with him, and mix-ups might result. Morale might decline, because he might not learn of gripes and complaints until they had built to a crisis proportion.

What he did do was little better. He allowed anyone to see him any time. But rather than paying careful attention to their problems, he was often preoccupied with his own interrupted one. He was nervous and tense about getting back to his work," and since he was too "busy" to listen carefully, he made visitors sorry they had ever come.

Set Up Availability Hours

I suggested that perhaps a better solution would be to create special "Availability Hours." We're all familiar with signs saying: "Salesmen seen only Tuesday and Thursday from 1-4" or "The Doctor sees patients only on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday." Availability Hours are those hours during the week when you're available to associates or others without appointment. At such times visitors may walk through your "open door" and feel free to discuss business, assured that their viewpoint will receive undivided attention. Mr. Bean decided to set up Availability Hours from 8 to 9:30 and again from 11 to 12 in the morning, leaving 9:30 to 11 as Quiet Time. He instructed the switchboard operator to take all routine calls during his Quiet Time so that he could work without interruption.

Quiet Time Can Backfire

Luckily, Mr. Bean remembered the case of Mr. Kent, who unexpectedly and unilaterally decreed that absolutely no one was to disturb him during Quiet Time between 8 and noon. The results were catastrophic. His subordinates struggled on their own, and hence made many more mistakes. Morale dropped, and his failure to take note of this reduced it even further. For a time Mr. Kent received congratulations from his boss. He seemed to be doing the right thing. The bravos died down when the state of organizational decline was fully appreciated. Eventually Mr. Kent was fired—in effect, be-

cause of his failure to balance Quiet Time and Availability Time.

So Mr. Bean discussed his proposed new arrangement with his key people and made changes based on their suggestions. Several thought they would try a little experimenting on their own, because they had also felt the need to get their own work done without interruptions. Mr. Bean made sure that they would bring to his attention any fallout that his proposed schedule might have on their jobs during the readjustment period.

How do you set aside Quiet Time and block out interruptions?

If you're a top executive, it's a cinch: just tell your secretary to take all your calls, turn any emergencies over to your Executive Assistant, and close the door of your private office.

If you don't have a secretary or switchboard operator to take your calls, you might tie up your telephone line a half hour a day by dialing your own number and leaving the phone off the hook so anyone calling you will get a busy signal.

You also need to keep others from coming by to talk to you during your Quiet Time.

Mr. Bean remained fair game for his colleagues so long as they saw that he was alone and therefore "not doing anything important." But then he told them about his idea of Quiet Time and put a sign on his desk that said "Quiet Time, please return at 11:30." Whenever someone approached him during Quiet Time, he pointed to the sign, asked whether the caller could wait until then, and made sure to get back to the interrupter promptly at 11:30.

When he was particularly in need of concentration, he looked around for an unused office or conference room. Sometimes he went to the public library. (A top executive confided to me that when he wanted Quiet Time he hid out in the back of a small coffee shop two blocks from his corporation's headquarters building.)

How To Handle the Sociables

Mr. Bean also found from his log that many people just stopped by to chat. He was on the main route to the water cooler and anyone running away from a difficult job back at

his desk found him easy game for a few minutes of relaxing. He therefore shifted his desk to a different angle. Then he took away the extra visitor's chair, because he found that when two escapees got talking together at his desk it meant a minimum of twenty minutes' time wasted. Finally, he tried to keep his head down so that he didn't catch the eyes of passersby.

The next problem Mr. Bean encountered was that he became lonesome during Quiet Time. He was so accustomed to talking to people that he kept hoping someone would interrupt him. Every time the phone rang, even though he knew his secretary would pick it up, he couldn't help wondering who was calling and what they wanted. Although it took a lot of willpower, he resisted the tendencies to pick up the phone himself or to jump up right afterward to get the message.

He found it difficult not to be helpful to whomever came his way, and though his secretary managed to keep many visitors away, those in his own organization who ignored her and marched right into his office with "Do you have a minute?"-type questions usually got his attention.

Mr. Bean still found it difficult to say "no" to anyone. But when he tried it a few times, he was surprised: Nothing serious happened. He found that most of the interrupters were simply in the habit of coming in and really could wait until later—and so could his own need to have other people around. Gradually he became more firm. His tone indicated he was not angry with the interrupter, but he was insistent that the other person respect his Quiet Time.

Alternating Quiet Time with Availability Hours worked well for Mr. Bean and it can work well for you too.

13. ASK LAKEIN'S QUESTION

YOUR LIFETIME GOALS STATEMENT, your To Do List, and your Schedule give you substantial control over the way you spend your time. Each of these is an extremely valuable planning tool. But they are not handy for the minute-to-minute decisions you have to make.

Who can take fifteen minutes to plan a dozen times a day? Nobody. You wouldn't get anything done. Which is why I'm going to hand you a new tool to use quickly and spontaneously as many times a day as you need it. It's called "ask Lakein's Question." Lakein's Question is: *what is the best use of my time right now?*

At first you'll have to remind yourself to keep asking Lakein's Question whenever you're not positive whether you're using your time to best advantage. After a week or so it should become second nature to you.

If your first answer when you ask Lakein's Question is "I don't know," then the best use of your time is to ask the question again. If you still get "I don't know," then tell yourself: "I already know *that*; but I still need a better answer."

I don't mean to turn this into some silly game of hide-and-seek. I do suggest to you that if you really don't know the best use of your time, then there's nothing more important than finding out. So do keep asking Lakein's Question until you get at least some sort of meaningful answer.

As soon as you get the first answer, stop.

Almost invariably, the first (and spontaneous) answer to Lakein's Question is the best, and you should accept it. But a mistake *is* always a possibility. So take just a moment to make your "go/no-go" decision. Your intuition may have taken the morning off. If you feel you can't act on your first answer, it's best to come up with an acceptable alternative at once.

Like all new habits, asking Lakein's Question takes a bit of

practice. As you adopt this routine, you'll find that your confidence increases, and that you come up consistently with good answers the first time around.

Ask Lakein's Question All the Time!

A particularly good time to ask Lakein's Question is when you have been interrupted by a visitor or telephone call (assuming that the interruption is desirable or necessary in the first place). When it's over, check whether you should go back to what you were doing or on to something new.

Also ask Lakein's Question when you notice that you are becoming distracted. Are you listening to a conversation in the next office? Wondering who just walked down the hall? Daydreaming about next year's vacation? Pop the question!

Also ask when you intuitively feel you may not be making the best use of your time. Or you detect a tendency to procrastinate. Or when you pause momentarily in the middle of doing an A-1. Or when you find yourself shuffling paper rather than processing it.

Ask it when you're torn between two different projects. When you run out of steam. Or at points where it seems natural to make the transition to something else.

To help you remember to ask Lakein's Question, put up signs around you saying "What is the best use of my time now?" and "Ask Lakein's Question" printed on them. The signs can be as visible as you wish. How about a large sign directly across from where you normally sit? How about using them as posters all over the house? Or if you want the signs to be less conspicuous, how about in a drawer or in your private notebook? You might even get some stationery with the question printed on it. (I once had pencils made up for my clients with Lakein's Question inscribed on them.)

Even if you know what the A-1 is and have started it, you can still ask Lakein's Question, but be a little more specific: What is the best use of my time now *on the A-1?* What part shall I do, and how shall I do it?"

Consider simplifying the task. Consider making it easier or faster. Should you phone or visit that slow-poke in the other department? Would it be better to write a letter to that long-winded customer so he doesn't gab on forever on the

phone—or do you really need a give-and-take discussion with him to get a quick decision?

A fast work place is also a strength. The ability to work very rapidly and perform well pays off, so check your work pace periodically by asking Lakein's Question. Maybe you're still hung up on last week's details. It happens.

You can also waste time on items that were once A's—but are A's no longer. Is that big order likely to be canceled? Has the deadline changed? Is that difficult account executive about to get fired? A former A may decline in value to B and then CZ not only with the passing of time, but also with the degree of its completion. The 80/20 rule suggests that 80 percent of the value is often gained during the first 20 percent of your work time on a certain task. Being a perfectionist may mean that you're working much too hard to get only minimum value.

When Perfectionism Helps—and When It Doesn't

Perfectionism is worth approaching when 80 percent of the value comes from the *last* 20 percent of the effort. For example: the construction of a dam, bringing home the family's favorite groceries, unstopping a plugged-up sink, remembering your wedding anniversary every year.

Perfectionism is a waste of time on such labors as ironing every last wrinkle out of a sheet or re-checking a low-priority letter for typing errors. Once you get immersed in some activities, they seem to acquire a momentum of their own. You may then be carried along without control, drifting with the tide.

One way to combat this drift is to set yourself control points for reviewing your progress. Check every fifteen minutes or half an hour—or go on until 3:30 and then review. One way to remember to do this is to use a kitchen timer. If you're not benefiting from continued effort, stop and change to do something else.

You can also set the timer to help you meet deadlines. If you need to get something done in half an hour, set the timer accordingly. If you find the ticking annoying, put it in the bottom drawer; then you'll hear only the bell. Suppose the timer rings and you're still not finished? To protect yourself,

don't set the timer for thirty minutes; set it for twenty. Then you can re-set priorities after twenty minutes. Are you sure you're on the right track? You might want to set the timer for another fifteen minutes as a reminder that the project is probably not worth any more time.

Do you suspect diminishing returns? Are you being needlessly perfectionistic? Ask Lakein's Question. If you're not sure whether it is worth finishing something (or worth continuing), I suggest that you stop. If you don't come back to it, then in fact you were done. If you feel uncomfortable the next day about having stopped and you want to continue, go back to it. But pretty soon . . . right! Ask Lakein's Question again.