

You Are Your Calendar

February 2011 Newsletter

Key Takeaways

- ✦ Your calendar never lies. If something is a priority, then it must be reflected in your scheduled work.
- ✦ Important work that isn't urgent must be built into your schedule — maybe not everyday, but with some frequency.
- ✦ If meetings, travel, and other exigencies are consuming your work hours, deploy countermeasures to reduce the burden: set new criteria, shed responsibilities, and delegate.

Tom Peters expressed it concisely: "[You are your calendar.](#)" If you say that something is a priority and your calendar doesn't reflect that by revealing large amounts of time allocated to that project, then it's not really a priority. Period. The calendar never lies.

The *Wall Street Journal* [wrote](#) about CEOs whose calendars are completely packed for months at a time. These executives complained that their crammed agendas eliminate spontaneity in their workdays and left them shackled to a schedule. The CEO of Novartis, for example, said that he can't spend as much time as he'd like at hospitals, talking with doctors and patients who use his products. In other words, the work these CEOs have logged in their calendars — board meetings, business trips, conferences, etc. — has made it nearly impossible to spend time on other activities of equal or greater value. But the calendar never lies: for the Novartis CEO, talking with doctors just isn't as important as his other duties.

Does this mean that the calendar as a tool for allocating scarce resources (time and attention) doesn't work? I don't think so. In fact, it's only the calendar that enables you to intelligently prioritize and act upon competing tasks and commitments by making your work visible.

I believe that the title of the WSJ article — "Packed Calendars Rule Over Executives" — is off-target. Calendars don't rule over people at all. In fact, I'd argue that without it, they'd be in even more trouble. All that's happened is that their calendars have revealed the full extent of their responsibilities.

I'm not saying that the burdens on CEOs — or on you — are trivial. But if, for example, visiting hospitals is critical to the company's long-term success, then hospital visits **must** be built into the schedule. And if there's not enough time, then they need to deploy countermeasures to ensure that they get the time. Whether that means they work longer hours, shed some of their other responsibilities, or delegate more of their work, if it's truly important then it's got to be in their calendars. Maybe not everyday or every week, but with some regularity that ensures the CEO is getting that critical task done.

Mark Hurd, the former CEO of Hewlett-Packard, has done something like this: he makes sure he has some breathing space on his calendar — empty time each day for things that just come up. It's not a far jump from this technique to scheduling 10 minutes per day to talk with one customer, or to walk the factory floor, or to talk to the software engineers. If it's important, it needs to become part of one's routine.

The next time you feel that all your time is consumed by obligatory responsibilities, take a long, hard look at your calendar and remember that the calendar never lies. Part of your job is to figure out how to include the items that are truly important to you and your work. Start by setting new criteria for what's important. Shed some responsibilities. Delegate work to others. Learn to say no.

There are only 24 hours each day, and there's only so much work that can be fit into that time. No amount of wishful thinking can change that. Disciplined use of the calendar is a way to make that constraint visible and deal with it appropriately.