

“Panic is my friend!”

Sound familiar?

When everything is a priority, deadlines are looming, and there just isn't enough of you or your team to go around, how do you cope with the stress, stay focused on results, and make things happen?

Perhaps you rely on the axiom, “I do my best work under pressure”. In truth, few of us really do. When tension and pressure build, mistakes are introduced, emotions get frayed, and neither the worker nor the work are better for it. Spending too much time at too high of an intensity not only prevents us from operating at our productive best, it can turn a labor of love into an exasperating experience.

Our productivity is largely dependent on the interrelationships of our workloads and our attitudes.

Each of us undoubtedly has some optimal zone of achievement—a balance of tension and clarity, of urgency and focus, of impetus and workload—wherein we are most productive, most fulfilled, and most able to develop to our fullest potential.

While I often joke that panic is my friend, I know better. I'm actually most productive in what I call my balanced zone. In this situation, my goals are clear, the steps to success are well laid out, the workload is reasonable, and I'm able to systematically achieve smaller results that build to a larger end. In short, I can effectively put thoughts into meaningful action. My attitude is positive and my daily routine has discipline and structure. I get to work on time. Even the little things like filing and organization get done. I take a decent lunch break. And perhaps most importantly, I end the day with a little energy left over to enjoy life. Ah, life (and work) is good!

Unfortunately, it's easy to stray out of the productive zone. Problems, customer demands, and a host of other issues can arise that drive us beyond the limits of a balanced approach. To compensate, what do you do? I work a little longer. I work a little faster. I work a little harder. Don't we all? But at some point this strategy falls short—we're working as hard, as fast, and as long as we possibly can. Sooner or later this do or die imbalanced approach takes its toll.

As my productivity, decisions, and sense of achievement deteriorates, so does my attitude—meetings become difficult to endure, deadlines seem insurmountable, and responsibilities grow endlessly. Sound familiar? We've entered the zone of imbalance.

At this point, the situation is becoming dangerous. One more unexpected problem, fickle customer, or accelerated deadline could easily create a frenzy of

misdirected, fractured effort. Seemingly, everything is a priority and everything was due yesterday. The probability of errors and omissions increases dramatically. Eventually, a noteworthy mistake occurs, a meeting is missed, or a deadline is broken—and the damage is done.

To get into a balanced zone of productivity, an environment of manageable urgency must be created.

No work system is completely immune to fickle markets, demanding customers, or self-imposed over optimism, but achievement can be improved by applying these simple rules to your work schedule.

Rule #1: Productivity doesn't come from hard work—it comes from hard results.

If you ask the people on your team what they're paid for, they'll likely reply, "They pay me to work!" In reality, what matters are the results we achieve, not the work we do. Make sure that you and your team focus on results rather than work. Be goal-driven for both the long- and short-term. Long-term goals help make us decisions, set strategy, and provides directional steerage. Supporting, smaller goals are the building blocks of results, giving us the traction to create real progress. When you hold yourself accountable to achieving your goals on a daily basis, you'll be moving forward in a real way.

Rule #2: If your schedule is 100% booked, you're over-booked.

Problems inevitably arise, situations change, and issues seemingly appear out of nowhere. To get more accomplished, schedule less. Keep some capacity in reserve for the unknown problems and you'll be more able to adapt and overcome when adversity arises. If problems don't materialize, the capacity won't go to waste—you'll just be able to achieve that much more!

Rule #3: Mom was wrong—you shouldn't always do your best work.

While high quality and personal excellence are admirable, be careful that you don't squander away precious time and energy on excess quality. Not everything deserves your best work. All too often our quest for excellence turns into a Don Quixote-type of quest for perfection. Just because you could make it better, doesn't mean you should spend the time or resources. Misplaced effort in unneeded improvements could be spent on additional achievement. The best way to determine how good is good enough, is not whether you can do it better, but whether or not it is fit for the intended purpose. Complete all work at a level of appropriate fitness for purpose, then move on.

Rule #4: Deadlines are important, but start dates are more important.

Ask anyone what the most important date on a project is and they'll likely tell you the due date—the deadline. While deadlines are important to stimulate action, coordinate work, and manage expectations, “finish no later than” deadlines and the huge goals that often accompany them can create an overwhelming sense of despair. As such, dramatic goals and deadlines may reduce, rather than improve, productivity and achievement. To prevent panic and build an environment conducive to achievement, create and maintain a sense of managed urgency.

To create your zone of achievement:

Step 1. Break the deliverables down into more manageable component tasks. In the project management body of knowledge this is known as decomposing the work, breaking major goals into phases of work, each phase into work activities, and each activity into the smallest unit, the task. Essentially, each task is a small goal. If for example a needs assessment was to be delivered on a given date, the assessment might be broken down into tasks such as collect data, survey users, compile data, and write report.

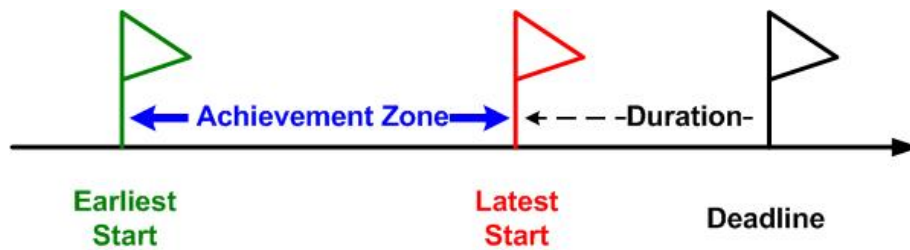
Step 2. Estimate amount of time you need to allow in your personal schedule to complete each task, given your other responsibilities and workload. For example, if a task takes two uninterrupted, focused hours of effort to complete, you might want to allow a total time in your schedule of a two days (or even more), to allow for your current workload, responsibilities, and typical interruptions.

Step 3. Determine what the latest possible start date could be for that task in order to meet the delivery deadline. This is your “late start” date and it obviously cannot be missed. To determine the late start date simple back up from the task’s deadline by it’s duration. For example, if the deadline was noon on Friday and your estimated duration allowed in your schedule was two days, the late start date for this task is noon on Wednesday.

Step 4. Determine the earliest possible start date for this task. In a simple situation, the earliest a task could be started is “right now”. In reality, you may be waiting on someone else’s data (seek their commitment to this date) or perhaps on your own availability, in order to establish your earliest possible start date.

Step 5. Choose when to complete this task by scheduling it between the earliest possible start date and the latest possible start date, and hold yourself accountable to the timeframe.

The figure below illustrates the process of creating a manageable sense of urgency for all your tasks.



With this approach, even when it seems that everything is a priority, deadlines are looming, and there just isn't enough of you or your team to go around, you don't have to panic!

Relax and get into the achievement zone:

- Focus on your goals
- Break them into manageable pieces
- Identify the earliest and latest possible starts
- Schedule the work and hold yourself accountable

Put this *Productivity PowerTool* to work and balance your tension and clarity, urgency and focus, impetus and workload — drive your success to new heights!

About Ron Black: Ron works with top managers who want to move their organizations to new levels of performance, with entrepreneurs launching new products and services, and with the world's most productive achievers. With over 30 years of business experience, Ron has built a reputation for delivering down-to-earth, results-proven tools of success in his seminars and books on project management, productivity and leadership. He is the author of two books, the latest of which is *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Project Management with Microsoft Project 2003*. Contact him at 800-381-8686 or at RonBlack@TheMentorGroup.com for training, project facilitation, and consultation.

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