

## Early career faculty time management challenges: The role of the leader

*"...it is mainly through the control of time that academic power is exercised."* - Pierre Bourdieu

As a leader in an academic unit (director of a research group or training grant, division chief, department chair, or dean) you have a responsibility to help your faculty succeed. You know the basics: mentoring for research, teaching, and general career development, support for grant and manuscript preparation, and provision of "start-up" (laboratories and other resources) so that research gets off to a good start. Hopefully your institution and/or professional society offers programs to which you can send your early career faculty to enhance skill building in these areas, as well as the "softer" skills of people management, negotiation, and so on.

You may not think that you have a role in helping your faculty use their time more effectively.

You should think again.

In my conversations with faculty members around the country, "too much to do" is a major source of stress. Although life in academic medicine has always been busy, the pressures these days are particularly intense. You know the effect that, for example, current dwindling of funding and constricted hospital budgets have on everyone. Based on a survey of early career academic medical center faculty, Bellini and colleagues<sup>1</sup> reported 21 workplace "stresses" identified by the group. Forty percent were time-related issues. Nearly 80% of the group felt stressed by both lack of work-life balance and "too many time pressures," and nearly 70% were already concerned about burnout. Some of the specific issues will sound familiar:

- too much paperwork,
- not enough time for research and other academic pursuits and
- lack of control over how time was spent.

I believe that senior colleagues, and especially leaders, have a responsibility to attend to these issues. Faculty members who have a clear idea of what they should do, and effective processes for getting that work done will be more likely to succeed, and this success contributes to the success of the unit and institution.

When I began work on this article, my idea was to offer the typical sort of "self-help" advice along the lines of "Seven easy steps an academic leader can take to ensure good faculty time management among..." -- but I soon realized that the issues are too complex for facile solutions.

Here is a nutshell message: simply telling someone to be more efficient does not work.

### Now for the long version.

Several principles have been useful to me as I think about these issues:

1. New faculty members may have never encountered time management issues before. The path to becoming a physician or scientist is structured, and can often be navigated successfully by those who have problems with procrastination, lack of focus, perfectionism, difficulty making decisions, and general disorganization. However, moving into a faculty position, with its multiple roles, responsibilities, and need for independently directed work, can quickly expose these problems. New faculty may be as shocked as you are at the problems they are experiencing, and they often have no idea how to change.
2. As mentors/advisors/coaches, we should not rely too much on our own experience. If you are among the "naturally organized," you may not really understand why anyone should need to learn these skills; some leaders in this category believe that time management skills are "soft" and not worth supporting. Or, you may have personally overcome time issues, and you have a system that works for you; you need to avoid the error of the convert in assuming your system will work for others.
3. Although an "intervention," such as reading a book or attending a workshop can get things off to a good start, lasting change takes time and experimentation to find what works. The mentor needs to be patient and not expect miracles.

4. Some people have no interest in change, or have an underlying condition that requires professional psychological/psychiatric help to make change possible.

So, although I can't provide easy answers, I do have several strategies for you to consider. These are framed as if you are the direct supervisor of the early career faculty member, but if you are the dean or the chair, you can expect, respectively, your chairs or division directors/mentors to use these approaches.

## **ONE**

**Help your faculty members identify the work they should be doing, and the work they should not be doing.**

I hope it will not come as a surprise to you -- although I agree that this reality is disappointing!

- Our supply of time cannot be expanded,
- We do not have time to do everything in which we are interested, and
- Thus, how we choose to spend our time is critical to successfully accomplishing our goals.

You are probably already expert at conveying clear expectations about outcomes, but I recommend that you go the extra step and discuss specifically what kinds of work will show progress toward those outcomes. New faculty may try to take on too much at once, Or, they may choose projects that seem to lead to the outcome, but you know they will not.

Counseling about "what not to do" can be challenging. Early career faculty often get sidetracked pursuing activities that do not move them toward their career goals, including promotion, or that are not of real value to themselves or the unit. Part of the challenge is that some activities which junior faculty choose sound as if they are valuable. You can think of many such examples, but these include agreeing to write a chapter (when peer review articles are a better use of time), joining a committee (that provides no direct career benefit), devoting excessive extra time to patient care activities, or collaborating on someone else's grant (when the research is not central to the junior person's focus).

Saying 'no' is difficult for many people, and it is particularly difficult for junior faculty. They worry about offending senior people or missing opportunities, or they simply don't know what is in their best interests. You can help by offering to be a sounding board anytime a junior faculty member gets asked to take on something new, and you can offer a "cover story" that can be used when the answer is no ("my division chief won't allow me to do this...").

Finally, ask yourself if the institution really is asking too much -and be willing to consider what might be taken "off the plate." I know this is difficult in our financially challenged times, but sometimes too much is too much, and we pay an institutional price in high turnover or disengaged, burned out faculty.

## **TWO**

**If the faculty member has been promised protected time, figure out how to really protect it.**

I know this is can be very difficult -- an extra clinic needs covering, classes of the professor on leave need to be taught, and so on --, but you have both a contractual and a moral obligation to follow through.

## **THREE**

**Create a work environment that promotes both productivity and well being.**

I believe this to be true: the academic health care center culture encourages people to work in ways that are not healthy, and not supportive of optimal productivity. Examples that I imagine will sound familiar: the expectation (for yourself or others) to work long hours; no breaks; no vacations; and in contact 27/7.

The consultant Tony Schwartz ([www.theenergyproject.com](http://www.theenergyproject.com)) is arguably the most prominent, and persuasive, proponent of healthier work practices. Two of his books, *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy Not Time* (2004) and *The Way We're Working Isn't Working* (2010) are reasonably evidence based discussions of why change is needed, along with concrete strategies for doing so.<sup>2</sup>

The issue of long hours is particularly difficult for early career faculty members. They have a lot to do, and more than can ever be completed. They see some of their peers praised simply for the hours put in ("That Jane is a real go-getter! She's the first one in the building every morning and the last to go home."). As the junior person is staggering out the door at night, already late for something important at home, they notice what they think is a disapproving glance from a senior faculty member still at his desk. Meanwhile, the faculty member has a family, needs sleep, exercise, and relaxation time - but feels so guilty they can't do any of these things.

Schwartz<sup>2</sup>, in a recent blog post, described the issue like this as part of a discussion of work place productivity myths:

*"Myth #4: The best way to get more work done is to work longer hours.*

*No single myth is more destructive to employers and employees than this one. The reason is that we're not designed to operate like computers — at high speeds, continuously, for long periods of time.*

*Instead, human beings are designed to pulse intermittently between spending and renewing energy. Great performers — and enlightened leaders — recognize that it's not the number of hours people work that determines the value they create, but rather the energy they bring to whatever hours they work."*

To be clear, it is not that long hours are always bad - they are either necessary or desirable sometimes -- but rather that a regular diet of long hours is neither sustainable, or associated with optimal productivity.

Here are a few concrete ideas to consider - but you should think beyond these to find approaches that work for your institution and group. This would be a great topic for brainstorming by your faculty as a group.

- Be explicit that faculty members will be evaluated based on the outcomes, not on "face time."
- Don't make comments, or even jokes, that imply the faculty member is not spending enough time at work (As Joe leaves the lab at 6:00 pm, you glance at your watch and say with a smile, "Joe - leaving a little early tonight, aren't we?"). Of course, this does not apply if someone is actually missing required appointments, or not producing outcomes. But address those problems directly.
- Take vacations, nights off, weekends out of the communication loop yourself, and encourage others to do the same. Talk with your colleagues about what you do to relax and relieve stress. You might benefit as well!
- Long hours are sometimes the result of a workplace that is so filled with distractions that work requiring concentration - like writing - can't be done during normal hours. Let your group know that it is OK to close the door or go off site to do intensive work.
- Watch for faculty members who may be spending too much time at work and seem to be distressed. Address the issue with them directly, express your concern over their apparent distress, and offer to brainstorm solutions or to find help, as appropriate.

#### **FOUR**

##### **Model communication methods that are respectful of people's time.**

I'm talking meetings and email practices here - both well-known workplace time sinks.

Model leadership of effective meetings, and mentor others to do the same. You probably know the basic best practices:

- Make sure the meeting is needed,
- Invite only the people who need to be there,
- Circulate an agenda in advance,
- Start and end on time,
- Stay on topic,
- Create explicit next steps at the end,
- Make sure it is clear who is responsible for each step or task, and
- Follow up to be sure these are done.

Some experts recommend that attendees stand during meetings to ensure brevity, but I can't personally go there!

Reducing the amount of time spent in email depends largely on developing more efficient personal email process (see, for example, my article "Getting Email under Control," posted on my website).

However, some changes in the workgroup email culture can help. Here are some ideas to consider:

- An agreement to create emails that make it easier for the recipient to handle: use of meaningful subject lines, messages limited to less than one screen length, clear instructions in either the **subject line** or the **first line** of the message about what is expected of the recipient (e.g. FYI only, "get back to me today about this:").
- An agreement not to use email for communications that are complex, or that involve conflict or the giving of bad news, or any other situation in which a conversation is more appropriate.
- An agreement about appropriate response times. Email is not the best medium for emergent communication, and you can encourage the use of phone, pagers, and walking down the hall to talk as alternatives. Establishing

an optimal upper end for response time is harder, because it depends on the kind of things for which the group uses email. My sense is that in most workplaces, a response by no later than the next day is expected.

- An agreement that people get to take breaks from email: no email during meetings; no responses expected overnight - say between 6 pm and 7 am, and on weekends; no connectivity while on vacation; and other breaks that make sense to your group such as when an individual is engaged in scholarly writing. Breaks will reduce the "addictive stress" of continuous email connectivity and will improve concentration and focus on real work.

## **FIVE**

### **Support individual change.**

Even though you are not a professional time management coach, as a leader you are in an excellent position to support and promote individual change. You have the authority to discuss these concerns, and ask for change; you either know personally or can find out from others, the nature of the problems and the productivity goals that are not being met; you have (at least some) resources you can bring to bear on finding solutions. If changes are undertaken, you can provide specific constructive feedback on whether progress is being made.

Some problems appear to have a straightforward solution, but one that may not be readily available. An example I hear about frequently is the frustration and inefficient use of time that results when a new faculty member receives no training in the institutional email and calendaring system, or in other software that is commonly used in the department. This problem would be relatively easy to solve, though I expect that budgets for this kind of training have disappeared at most places. To help with this problem you may need to both provide release time and pay for the training - but the long term payoff will be worth it.

At the unit level, you can support - or encourage the institution to offer -- workshops on various time management topics, and access to other self-help resources (books, on line resources, etc.). These methods are sometimes, understandably, met with skepticism as to their effectiveness. Here I need to reveal my conflict of interest as a presenter of these kinds of workshops, and I agree that "proof" of effectiveness is hard to come by. That said, the long term feedback I receive from participants supports the idea that a workshops can get someone started on a path to change, or can provide that one new idea that makes a difference. If you are going to use this approach, my advice is to use the highest quality presenters available.

Finding help for individual complex time management problems is challenging. While there is no guarantee of success, I encourage you to try. You can get ideas from colleagues, and your institution's faculty affairs leaders and human resources offices. There may be private coaches who come highly recommended, and if you are able, you can provide some financial support directly, or allow the faculty member to use a career development account for that purpose.

Living with time stress has become a way of life in our culture. I believe that as a leader, using these ideas as a start, you can make a difference for yourself and your faculty.

By: Susan R. Johnson, MD  
University Ombudsperson  
Professor of Obstetrics & Gynecology, and Epidemiology  
University of Iowa  
srj.susanjohnson@gmail.com  
www.thrivingamidstchaos.com

## **References**

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(2) Schwartz, Tony. HBR Blog Network; Four Destructive Myths Most Companies Still Live By (11:17 AM Tuesday November 1, 2011) <http://blogs.hbr.org/schwartz/2011/11/four-destructive-myths-most-co.html>