

Time—Our Most Important Resource

Remember the last time someone came to you and asked, “Got a minute?” For the record, there are 1,440 of them in one day. And every one of them is precious. Just like cash, once it is used up we can’t get it back.

Stewards have lots of roles. We communicate, handle grievances, organize and educate. All of these roles demand that we spend time on different tasks. If we don’t have a system of time management, we can fall behind in our union work and burn out really fast.

So let’s look at how we use our time and try to spend it more wisely. First we need to assess what our tasks are. This is the beginning of the planning process. The better we plan ahead, the better use we will make of our time. Otherwise, as Ben Franklin once said, “By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.” And who would doubt a genius like Franklin?

Today, you may be facing a very routine grievance with a seven-day time limit that your contract outlines. In order to file

that grievance properly (that’s your goal), you need to break it down into separate tasks. Those tasks might include talking with three witnesses, examining company records, interviewing the grievant and supervisor, and writing up the grievance. That’s pretty typical grievance work.

But you need to take each of those tasks and break them down further into simpler tasks. You want to interview each witness but in order to maximize your time and not have to make repeat visits or phone calls, you must think about what information you need from each person and how long you will talk with them. Then you can schedule the interviews in the most efficient manner to get that information. You don’t want to play telephone tag or shoot messages back and forth interrupting other important work so that nothing gets finished.

As you begin to work out your overall goal of filing this grievance you should begin to write down your timeline in a date book or in some kind of planner, written or electronic. You can begin to fill in the interviews on that timeline as you schedule them. You might want to speak with the grievant first so you can corroborate what he or she tells you with the information from the witnesses or the company records. But you need to think this process through before you schedule any interviews. Logic will dictate what you will do and when.

To keep track of the smaller tasks, create a “To Do” list. You may need to call someone, return a call, check a fact, or copy a document. Each action should

be checked off as you accomplish it. The paperwork keeps you on task and accurate. There is less chance of small actions falling through the cracks.

You will probably have other union business that same week. As you begin to work on a number of projects simultaneously, your “To Do” list will expand. The “To Do” list can become very long so you should indicate higher priority items to avoid wasting time on less important tasks. Keep your list honest. Don’t put tasks on it that are undoable, unreal, or unrelated to real issues.

Once you have gotten through your lists and timeline you will have the information you need to write up the grievance. Of course, you need to build time into the schedule so you don’t rush the grievance filing itself.

Let’s review the important steps:

1. Understand what your goal is and think about how you break it down into smaller achievable tasks.
2. Use a calendar, time planner, or diary to keep track of deadlines for your intermediate tasks and final goal.
3. Create “To Do” lists, prioritize tasks, and check off items as you accomplish them. As you begin to add tasks at the bottom of your list, you will need to rewrite it. Prioritize items on the “To Do” list every time you rewrite it.
4. Be honest about this list and do not make it a dumping ground for everything you want to do someday. Learning to ski may be a wonderful goal but it is not relevant here.

It doesn’t matter whether your lists and timelines are written or electronic. It does matter that you follow them, revise them, and most important of all, use them.

TWU History

Local 260, representing transit workers in Houston, defied Jim Crow back in 1949 at its integrated union meetings. In 1962, it organized the Pioneer Bus Company and challenged its dual operations which had one bus unit for white drivers and maintenance workers and a separate one for African American workers that paid less. TWU won a ground-breaking contract that created a single unit with single pay scales.

