



Mind Time

by Les Cunningham

If you're like many other builders and remodelers, you spend a large part of your working day running from one emergency to another, "putting out fires." The list of items that command your immediate attention seems endless: The crew on one of your sites has come up short of material; framing on another job is at a standstill because the owner wants to discuss a change order that will affect the structure; the final payment on a completed project is being held up because a few punchlist items aren't finished yet. Your list of emergencies may differ in the particulars, but the net result is the same: You never complete the work you want — and need — to get done.

The effect can be paralyzing, not just for you but also for the employees and subs who depend upon you. Your frustration and the feeling of being constantly out of control affects the ability of the people you work with to get their work done. Some of those people, of course, are your clients. When your lack of planning and inefficiency begins to affect client satisfaction, you're working against yourself.

It's human nature, at least among builders, to assume that these kinds of problems would disappear if only there were more hours in the day. Well, I've got news: If there *were* more hours in the day, there'd be more emergencies to eat them up. Since you can't buy, borrow, or steal any more than 168 hours in a week, I suggest you come at the problem from the other end: Use the time you've got more efficiently.

The best way I know to do this is to create what a builder I work with calls "mind time" at the beginning and end of each working day. Early in your day, use mind time to think calmly and without distractions about the most important tasks you need to accomplish. These become priorities that control the tempo of your day.

To keep your mind time from

becoming an extended daydream, however, you need to keep track of the day's goals on a written list. At lunch and at the end of the day, use mind time to review the list to compare your plan with what actually happened. If you accomplished less than you thought you would, try to discover why; then ask yourself what you need to do to get back on track. Do this for 21 days, and I guarantee that you will have created a habit. In a very short time, you will become adept at getting your most important work done. And as a bonus, you will have made some progress toward reducing the number of emergencies you have to deal with.

As an example, look at the two to-do lists (below). The activities are the same on both, but the time slots are different. A person working from the first list may find at the end of the day that all three site visits were accomplished, but that little progress was made on the estimate. The problem is that the site visits are scheduled for times of day that are too far apart. You would need to interrupt estimating work done at the office three times, once for each appointment. The solution is the second list, which shows all three of the appointments scheduled for the same morning with enough time between them to allow for travel.

Another solution would be to schedule three appointments for three different days.

In this case, mind time at the end of the day helped pinpoint a time-scheduling problem to which there is a fairly simple fix. But without making a deliberate effort to reflect on why the estimate wasn't getting done, you might never change the way you scheduled appointments.

Some problems, however, will require more work to

correct. You may discover, for example, that you must often interrupt your work in the office to visit sites to discuss change orders. Since a client's desire to change something can't be predicted or scheduled like an appointment, these interruptions will persist unless you find a way to handle them differently. One solution is to tack a \$50 or \$100 administration fee onto all change orders; this may discourage your clients from initiating frivolous changes. Another solution is to delegate to your job foreman the authority to scope out the change, figure a list of materials, calculate the extra labor, and estimate the effect on any subcontractors.

The point I want to emphasize is that you can't allow interruptions or unexpected events to control your time. Surprises must be addressed, but not at the expense of important scheduled tasks. By reserving several short periods of mind time each day, you can identify the kinds of distractions that cut into your productivity, then take steps towards reducing or eliminating them.

In practice, of course, you will need to make appointments several days or weeks in advance. You may also prefer to plan the next day's task list the night before. Or you may find it helpful to plan an entire week at one time. The important point is to reserve mind time at the beginning and end of each day to set and review goals. ■

Les Cunningham spent 15 years running his own remodeling company. He now operates Business Networks, a consulting firm that conducts peer-review workshops with more than 100 remodeling companies nationwide.

To Do: Monday 16 Oct 95

- a.m. 7:00 Thomas estimate
- 9:30 Allen, site mtg. w/ architect
- p.m. 1:00 Johnson, final walkthrough
- 4:15 Cobb, measure kitchen

To Do: Monday 16 Oct 95

- a.m. 8:00 Allen, site mtg. w/ architect
- 10:00 Cobb, measure kitchen
- 11:15 Johnson Final walkthrough
- p.m. 1:00 Thomas estimate

Estimating work planned for 7 a.m. in the top list has little chance of getting done, because it will be interrupted three times during the day for outside appointments. The bottom list groups outside appointments together, leaving all afternoon to work on the estimate.