

## **What I learned about Time Management from Running and a Tomato**

Life lessons often come from places you least expect. Now before you become concerned that I am going to preach the virtues of running or changing your diet, no worries - that's not my agenda. I would like to share, however, what I have learned this past year not about Time Management, but true Productivity. After all, isn't that the real goal of managing time, to increase your overall success in accomplishing what you want in life?

If anyone would have told me years ago that I would run a ½ marathon at age 50, I would have shrugged my shoulders and said "No way...why would I ever do that?" Having never run around a neighborhood block without stopping several times to catch my breath, I knew such a feat was not in my future. But, one thing led to another and I got swept up in the challenge. The truth is that I didn't want to be left out as my friends planned their big event! As for the Tomato... I'll get to that shortly.

So with training schedule in hand, all I had to do was follow the plan and run the required miles as dictated by the calendar, right? Easier said than done. Anyone who has ever mapped out a long-term project knows that some of those interim action steps can often be justified away... oh, there's still plenty of TIME left before it's *really* important. Our minds can justify lots of excuses.

Here is what I learned along the way that I believe truly made the difference in getting me across the finish line:

1. Be clear on your interest and motivation.

Many people, myself among them, are driven by a general sense of "should" when it comes to accomplishing much of their required activities (homework, laundry, paying bills). Running certainly did NOT fall into that category. So especially on the coldest days, I needed to have an answer to my question "WHY am I doing this??" [Note: For many people with ADHD, without strong *intrinsic* interest and motivation, even everyday responsibilities can pose a challenge. Their wiring does not work off of the "should" incentive, making knowing WHY they are needing to do what they "should" do more vital.] I boiled that answer down to one repeatable Mantra, a statement I could (and did!) repeat to myself in moments of weakened resolve or interest.

2. The lesson of the Tomato.

Shortly before beginning my running venture, I had learned a technique for deepening my concentration and efficiency during work time called The Pomodoro Technique [note: "Pomodoro" is Italian for "Tomato". You can find a full description of the technique in the following article] Essentially; it is a way of breaking your work time into "Pomodoros" ("units of time" such as 25 minutes). When you set out to do your work for a Pomodoro, you write any distracting thoughts on a piece of paper to be accomplished later. Your goal is to "Protect the Pomodoro", meaning guard your work time as sacred. By defining a specific, finite amount of time to work, you develop the ability to

concentrate deeper and are more effective. You then take a 5 minute break where your mind and eyes get to rest and relax. I used to resist the 5 minute break time when I was absorbed in my work, thinking that I might lose my train of thought, or might have a harder time returning. I have experienced that the breaks I take during work time actually do increase my overall productivity. I can work longer overall, and during my “Pomodoro” can push myself through the extra minutes, knowing the time will end and I will have my break.

When I began my running venture with my friends we were total novices. The mistake many people make when trying to run distance is that they don’t allow themselves to break until they feel they really need it, believing that their over all time would suffer with too many breaks. We were soon taught that interval training was an effective way to build endurance. We started by running 1 minute and walking 1 minute, gradually increasing the amount of time we ran, but always including the minute walk time for recovery. My experience with the Pomodoro carried over into my running sessions. I found that by taking the walk breaks, even when I was not yet “in need” of a break, my overall run was more successful. During our running intervals we were able to push ourselves to hold on a little longer. Taking planned, limited breaks allowed us to push harder, longer and actually lowered our overall time. Just as I had learned that my work was more productive using the Pomodoro Technique.

### 3. Getting started is often the hardest part.

In the words of Yoda, “Do or do not, there is no try.” When you are faced with 17° weather and 5 miles on the schedule, there is no sort of trying... you either commit to get out there or not. But somehow, on most occasions, once you get started, your body warms up, you get involved, and even if you are not having the best run, you somehow need to get back home so you might as well run and get there faster. With work, getting started may not be easy – but if you give yourself a choice... well you probably will choose the “other”. Sometimes to succeed, you must do the thing you hate, so just settle in and do it.

### 4. Know when to push, and when to forgive yourself.

There are times we all need to trust our bodies, and our minds. Whether it’s lack of a good nights rest, a brewing cold, or other genuinely pressing matters that must be attended to, there are times when we just cannot keep to a plan. The trick here is to be honest with yourself and notice if the “excuses” are piling up or whether they are truly justified. And if they are real reasons for not tackling a “to do”, then let it go. In the words of the Pomodoro Technique... “The next Pomodoro will go better”.

### 5. When someone is counting on you it’s a lot harder to bale out.

The students I coach often say that they are more inclined to do their homework when they know the teacher is going to collect it. We can all relate to that one. When you know that others are counting on you, it makes most of us think just a little longer and

harder before shirking off our commitments. There was more than one run where I would NEVER have gotten up and out if I didn't know canceling on my partner meant she would likely not run as well. And as soon as a call would come in, "Cindy, I can't run today because..." I was often likely to allow my own resolve to weaken and justify, well, that maybe I could skip just *this* run. And so we did for each other, even when we didn't feel like doing for ourselves.

When students can find a partner to prepare for tests with and divide the work, maybe each being responsible to outline different concepts or make half the flash cards, they are more likely to study longer and harder. When we as adults can find ways to complete goals together, whether exercise, cooking healthy meals, or tackling household projects, we often find it easier to "find the time".

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