

## The Business Of Farming: Managing Your Time

By S. D. Parsons

At a recent meeting a man asked for suggestions on ways to improve his time management. Asked why, he said "At our first WOTB meeting my wife complained that I am always so busy that I seldom spend any time with her and the children."

Not surprisingly there are farm wives who resent a lifestyle where the husband leaves home at sunrise pops in for breakfast, lunch and tea and gets home after dark, pours a drink and collapses in front of the TV. Most of us are so accustomed to working long hours in the business that in our minds this becomes the way life should be led. It's a paradigm, a habit, and one not easily broken. But as another member of the group said at the same meeting, "Here we are away from the farm and other businesses for three days and yet everything continues normally." Rhetorically he asked, "If we can do it today why can't we organise our lives so we can do it every day?"

Good question, but then how many people are ever taught anything about time management? I recall that Conex used to have a department that dealt with time and motion studies. Perhaps Agritex still does, but that is part of fallacy of time management. We think in terms of efficiency and not in terms of effectiveness. Most time management courses are designed to teach people how to manage the minutes and hours in the day but seldom how to manage the days in the week or the weeks in the year.

Remember, the 80:20 rule (the Pareto Principle), which states that 20% of what we do produces 80% of the result. On the other hand 80% of our time is spent on things that produce very little result. When all is said and done it is not a question of how many hours you work, nor how dirty your hands get but what you achieve that determines success. In short, we fritter away our time and then complain about how much there is to do.

Most farmers are so busy solving the problems that occurred yesterday that they spend no time on where they want to be in the future. Witness for example, the number of people who end up with the type of family problems that I mentioned in my last article. They are undoubtedly good farmers who work very hard, but they are lousy business managers who are likely to lose much of what they have worked for – all because they never took the time to work ON the business.

I can't remember where I heard it but another saying that makes very good sense is, "*What a person does may not be as important as what is left undone.*"

If you are one of those who wonders how to fit everything that needs to be done into the available hours here are a few thoughts that you may wish to consider.

1. **Plan your time.** Not in your head, but in writing. Schedule regular planning times - not at the end of the day when you are tired, but in prime time. While your time working IN the business may be worth \$500 an hour, the time you

spend working ON the business may be worth a hundred times more in what it achieves.

One of the best tips I got on managing time came from a book written in the 1930's called 'How I Raised Myself From Failure To Success'. In it the author spoke of the desperate days during the Great Depression. He finally concluded that in order to succeed he needed to plan. He didn't do so in half measure, but rather spent all day every Friday planning in detail what he would do the following week. Interestingly he spent 20% of his time planning what he would do with 80% of his time.

- 2. Schedule separate times for WOTB meetings and WITB meetings.** WITB meetings are those when you plan what needs to be done next week. They usually involve the foremen and middle level managers in the business. Conversely, WOTB meetings are where the strategic level decisions are taken – things like business growth, management succession, steps to risk proof the business etc. A couple of hours a week on WOTB (and that does NOT mean doing the books) will have an enormous impact on the success of your business.
- 3. Distinguish between what is important and what is urgent.** Human beings have an inherent tendency to work on the urgent rather than the important. To overcome that urge try applying the following priority rating system to your next "To Do" list, or meeting agenda (FA chairmen please pay particular note).

First (and always before you think about how urgent the issue is), identify the importance of a particular issue using the following scale:

- 1 = of little importance to the success of the business,
- 3 = it would be nice if we could achieve this (or avoid it if it is negative),
- 5 = VERY important to success, and finally,
- 50 = this would absolutely make the business if it could be achieved. Or if it was negative and this happens, it would destroy us.

'50s' should not occur more than once in a list of 20 items.

Secondly, and only after you have identified the importance of each issue, identify the urgency of on a rating of 1, 3, 5, 7, 9. Where 1 is not at all urgent and 9 must be done immediately.

- 4. Set aside time to work on those things with the highest priority.** Now that you have decided on the priority of what must be done schedule your time. But first schedule the time that you will spend with your family and time for yourself. Never plan to fill every hour of the day. Start by planning not more than three important things you can accomplish in a day.

Leave at least 25% of the time unscheduled for unexpected emergencies and things that take longer than expected. If at first you don't get everything on the schedule completed it means that you have tried to fit in too much. The object of the exercise is to finish the day with a clear slate.

5. **Create blocks of time for time.** Use yearlong planning calendars to schedule time consuming activities like budgeting, so that you can concentrate on the task at hand without interruption. Unless you are an American who only gets two weeks leave a year (and they call that civilisation!), schedule time for holidays too.

Something I hear over and over again is “Of course we plan”. As an Australian said on one of my courses a few years ago, “I work on the business all the time; when I’m bed with my missus, when I’m driving the Ute across the paddock. In fact I never stop planning”. It was easy to see that he’d missed the point. He wasn’t working on the business. He was doing what we all do. He was going round and round in circles worrying about the business.

If you want to take charge of your life try setting aside time to plan your time. Done right it can pay enormous dividends.

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