



Time Cycles

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Cycles punctuate our existence; they are all around us. Many natural events like day and night, reproduction and the tides all follow well-defined cycles. Social phenomena such as the economy, business and fashion also follow fairly predictable cycles. The seasons are one of the most visible cycles. Although there is some variation, every year has a spring, summer, fall and winter.

The dictionary defines a cycle as a periodically repeated event. Cycles follow predictable patterns. They are circular processes that begin with a clear starting point, progress through a series of stages and finally come to an end, which then becomes the new starting point. Cycles are intrinsic to life and give structure to our activities. We take comfort in the predictable pattern of old things coming to an end and new things beginning. Cycles are clearly visible to people who have contact with nature or who live in agrarian settings. But, for people who live in an information society, doing business electronically around the clock, it is easy to lose touch with the cyclical foundation of life. In this environment, life becomes linear, something to be lived in a straight line from point A to point B.

In a linear world, progress depends on forward movement and winning consists of moving forward more quickly than our competitors. In this context, life may take on a sense of all consuming urgency as we set goals and make plans and try to do it now. The consequences of this approach can be severe. As we mindlessly try to squeeze a month's work into a week, a week's work into a day and a day's work into an hour, stress levels increase, productivity levels fall and the quality of life decreases.

Despite the reality of the changes in our competitive environments, we don't have to get caught in the linear rat race. There are alternatives that will allow us to achieve success and satisfaction. We can do this by harnessing the power of cycles as a framework for managing our lives and our work.

Let me explain what I mean. Here is a simple system I've evolved over time. It's been field-tested with a number of executives and it work well. Perhaps it will work for you, too.

STEP ONE

Identify the five to seven major categories of activities you must do well to be successful in your job and your life. These themes should be high level and broad. For example, one senior executive I worked with said his job revolved around five major themes: strategy, finance, organizational development, measurement and innovation. In a cyclical approach, these areas become the basis for your activity. You may think of them as 'seasons'.

STEP TWO

Establish a cycle that will allow you to regularly rotate through all of your 'seasons'. This can be accomplished by giving each day a theme, for example, Monday for strategy, Tuesday for finance, Wednesday for organizational development and so on. Make sure the schedule is balanced and workable. Print out a master sheet for the front of your diary that lists the themes on a day-by-day basis.

STEP THREE

Spend some time each day thinking about the assigned theme and plan your day with the theme in mind. If today's focus is strategy, spend some thinking about strategy and ways you can improve your organization's competitive position. The goal here is not to devote the whole day to strategy, it's to make sure that you don't get so caught up in activity and forget to think about the things that are important. As Dwight Eisenhower is reported to have said, "Don't just do something; stand there (and think)". Make adjustments in the sequence until it works for you.

STEP FOUR

Once you establish a cycle that works for you, make it a routine. Once it has become a habit, teach the approach to people you work with, especially the ones who report to you. Soon others will fall into the routine and make it a natural way of doing business in your organization.

STEP FIVE

Monitor your progress. Establish a regular time each week to sit down and review your progress over the past week. Evaluate your results and celebrate your successes. At the same time, identify key things you want to accomplish in each area for the following week.

Now let's run through an example. This is the pattern developed with a client executive.

Sunday's focus is on measurement and evaluation.

Monday's focus is on strategy.

Tuesday's focus is on customers and key relationships.

Wednesday's focus is on research and product development.

Thursday's focus is on organizational effectiveness.

Friday's focus is on details and follow through.

Saturday's focus is on health, family and renewal.

The benefits of this approach are many.

One: It automatically refocuses you on the key themes that are fundamental to your success. The 80/20 rule tells us that 80% of our achievement will come from 20% of our efforts. Without a clear focus on your critical few, you are likely to get drawn into the pattern of crisis management and fire fighting that is so common in modern organizations. With a cyclical approach, if you do get sidetracked, it's easy to start over again with the beginning of the new cycle next week. Spring is only a week away.

Two: It establishes a natural routine. I recently had an opportunity to talk with an Olympic athlete. I asked her what she had learned from competing at an elite level. She responded, "There is no excellence without routine". A system like this establishes a routine. Doing the right things becomes a habit.

Three: It is very simple system to use. It is not time intensive; it does not require elaborate tools. People catch on to it immediately. The only work required to set it up revolves around identifying your key theme areas, which can usually be accomplished in less than half a day. Once the themes are identified, use them as a framework for structuring your daily activities.

Four: It fosters alignment. If you engage the people you work with and help them understand your key themes and how the approach works, soon everyone will align their efforts around the same themes. The themes become a common framework that subtly organizes everyone's activities.

Five: It fosters continuous improvement. Since measurement and evaluation are built into the approach, you can use what you learn from the previous week to improve next week's results

By following this approach you can harness the natural power of cycles in your life.
It works. Try it.