

# extension work— caretaking or zookeeping?

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Janice M. Weber

Probably no resource causes as much concern for Extension workers as that of time. In these days of shortages, cutbacks, inflated prices, and administrative changes, we're still faced with a job to do, public relations to perform, and a personal life to live.

If one needs more disposable personal income, there are ways to sell off goods or services to increase income. But how does an already busy person increase disposable personal time? We may begin to feel out of control as the year slips away, a full calendar controls the future, and a month passes that we feel did little to advance us in the accomplishment of the goals we put in our annual plan of work. Days set aside for preparation of materials that end up with many client calls, unscheduled conferences, personnel problems to solve, and letters that must be answered are days that end up with extra hours spent in the office or with work taken home.

The very nature of time itself creates some frustration when compared with the nature of Extension. Often we hear that people in Extension just know that their jobs aren't going to be eight-hour days, five days a week. The fact remains that Extension people still have 24 hours a day that they stretch like plastic wrap to cover the responsibilities of the position.

## **Zookeepers Not Just Caretakers**

As I've worked with time personally and professionally, I've found some real similarities between time management and effective monkey care! Extension workers must begin to see themselves as effective zookeepers instead of just caretakers.

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Think about monkeys for a minute. What do you see? They may be mangy, screeching, cute, quiet, and a variety of sizes. Some require heavy security, some no restraints at all. Some cute cuddly babies grow up to be big gorillas! Now, still picturing monkeys, think—a monkey is *any* involvement or activity dependent on my time and energy for its accomplishment.

Some activities or involvements in my job are those I don't necessarily want to face—some seem ugly and unmanageable; some I don't mind at all—fun to be involved with. Some I'd like to keep; some I'd just as soon get rid of. Not all activities need my full undivided attention just as not all monkeys require the zookeeper's full time and attention. At some times, one monkey may need a little extra tender loving care, just as some activities may require more time for a while and a minimum of time later.

If animals are well cared for daily, there's less probability of their becoming ill and needing extra attention or care. Just imagine a whole cage of sick monkeys needing attention NOW! If you manage your time along the way, you seldom have to work out peak loads. The real frustration comes when we're faced with a whole day of things that needed to be done yesterday.

To get your activities in line, as a start, you may have to stop some of the things you're doing now. Perhaps you've heard, "Ask a busy person and you'll get it done?" Now you have become that busy person everyone seems to be asking! Our problem as busy people in the Extension profession is that we become caretakers for many screaming monkeys and feel we've just spent the day cleaning cages, watering the animals, and serving rations instead of being in charge of the managerial duties that need to be done to keep the whole plan working.

### **Being Effective Time Manager**

How do you get to be a zookeeper instead of just a caretaker? What kind of a person is an effective time manager? Just as there are prerequisites for people in the zookeeping profession, there are prerequisites for becoming effective time managers. It doesn't require a special degree, but it **does** require a degree of special personal management. The prerequisites are three, directly related to personal and professional management.

#### *Desire To Improve Managerial Skills*

You must seriously and sincerely want to be a good zookeeper. You must want to improve and know how to improve your managerial skills. Often we think we'd like to be a

zookeeper when we'd rather be doing the caretaker's job. If you have become a supervisor, are you still trying to be an agent? If you're a good typist, are you still typing your memos and letters because you don't want to ask your secretary? Do you still make all your travel arrangements or could someone else do this for you? If you think you're already too busy, what are you willing to give up so you can really take on the challenging or larger tasks that will advance you?

Being too busy is an acceptable excuse in our society. If you really don't want to do some job, you can always say, "I'd like to do that, but I'm just too busy." But do you find yourself too busy to do the really creative elements the job offers?

*Recognize  
Degree of  
Freedom*

Second, you must have the freedom to manage and recognize your degree of freedom. There are deadlines, dates by which reports and budgets are due. Instead of becoming frustrated over those things you can't change, change those you can. You can't change the fact that the fiscal year has a beginning and end, and you can anticipate reports due at that time. There are other dates you set for yourself that can help you in your job as you set realistic goals and plans for their accomplishment. Do you feel yourself in charge, or are you being manipulated?

If you have the responsibility for the care and feeding of a certain monkey (task), be sure you understand just how much freedom you have. What's required of you on this job? Sometimes we find ourselves taking on jobs that we feel we understand, but as we become more involved, that cute little monkey grows into a gorilla. Do you find yourself with apparently a great degree of freedom that's going to make someone else look great—they go on to be the zookeeper and you find you're still left cleaning cages and doing menial Extension tasks?

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*Takes Time  
To Change*

The third prerequisite is one's recognition that it takes time to be a good manager. This may seem to contradict the whole idea, but realize for a minute that you have been learning time management for however many years you

are old. It takes about five minutes to feed a monkey at a zoo—extra care takes longer. There are many tasks that can be done in about five minutes. It takes practice to set priorities and stick with them. It takes practice to write plans of work that will actually work out to be effective time plans for you. When you are given a job to do, either by someone else or one that you determine yourself, think it through before you begin. If you wrote an ambitious plan of work for yourself and found that you didn't have time to accomplish it to your satisfaction, evaluate what happened and why before you make the same mistake again.

When the pressure increases, you may find yourself faced with a whole day (or even week) of tasks—none of which was supposed to take more than a few minutes, but they're suddenly all number one priority, and all need to be done NOW. Too many of those days intensify stress at work.

Often we feel we don't have time to plan. I feel you don't have time not to plan. Think about the time you already have that you could make better use of—time that you spend driving or commuting to work, time you spend waiting in the line at the gas station, at a stoplight, grocery store, or at the dentist's office. When you know you'll have periods to wait or be unintentionally delayed, plan to use that time beneficially to advance toward goal accomplishment or just enjoy those few minutes.

Once you have internalized the prerequisites and admit that you do want to become a more effective manager, that you recognize your degree of freedom in changing your time and tasks, and have accepted the fact that a change in managerial patterns won't come overnight, how do you go about putting the role of zookeeper to work?

### **Care of Tasks and Priorities**

As in animal care, some things are legal and some are illegal. The same applies to the care of one's tasks or priorities.

#### *Don't Procrastinate*

It's illegal to let an animal starve. In managerial terms, a procrastinated activity is a starving monkey! This means you must not procrastinate while you let a problem drag on by feeding out weak excuses for why you haven't done an effective time management job. Let's face it, some daily routine jobs are rather hum-drum. It's usually those that aren't particularly exciting that we put off doing.

Starving isn't a humane way to treat a monkey and procrastination isn't a good substitute for problem solving. A task procrastinated long enough may get so sick that you end up having to put in more time reviving it than it would

have taken to do in the first place. Just think of trying to give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to a dying monkey. You may get that same sick feeling as you begin a task that has nearly been procrastinated to death!

Some rules of care are legal. It's always legal to have a full and healthy schedule, to be busy and happily so, to be involved in many activities and enjoying them all. But a word of caution—remember, people will be willing to give you as many monkeys as you are willing to care for!

*Evaluate and  
Return Tasks*

It's also legal to look at the activities in which you're involved, evaluate them, and then return those that aren't yours to their rightful owners. In managerial terms, this is called "delegation of responsibilities." Ask yourself: Why should I work at becoming more efficient at something I shouldn't be doing in the first place? If you find that you're spending a lot of your precious time feeding and caring for other people's problems, take a good look at the problem. If it's not really yours, return it to the rightful owner.

As you look for the appropriate caretaker for a task, ask: Whose responsibility is it REALLY? Who could feed it equally well, if not better, than I? That's the person who should feed that particular monkey. Sometimes we fear giving a responsibility to someone who might let it starve; other times we fear giving someone a responsibility that they may groom into a grand champion, and for which they get credit while we miss out on the praise given for a job well done!

If you give someone a task to do (a monkey to care for), let go of the tail. No one appreciates being given a job and then hovered over or checked on continually. If you do delegate and want to check on the progress occasionally, ask for a review—a time when people who have delegated responsibilities get together and parade their monkeys of accomplishment. (Sometimes these reviews are called staff meetings.) You then know how things are progressing, but the responsible people still maintain ownership and responsibility for their tasks.

*Disposal*

One of the more difficult, but legal, actions concerns disposal of a monkey. It may be that a monkey simply needs to be put out of its misery. Task forces that keep meeting after the task is accomplished, committees that have always been but lack purpose may be activities that require your time and energy and accomplish nothing. It may be time to shoot them. If an activity is beyond help, has served its

purpose, or needs to be disposed of, it may need to be humanely put to rest.

## **Summary**

As you think of your responsibilities to your job, your family, your community, and yourself, be sensitive to YOU. Do you find you're more often in a zookeeping position, or one of the caretaker?

As you think of the list of monkeys you need to care for today, which ones could be handled equally well, if not better, by someone else—WHO? Which ones could be put to rest; which ones will you feed and care for?

If you seriously want to improve your personal time management and ease the stress you feel in your job, be encouraged to take the freedom you do have to manage and control your own time. Remember, it's going to take some time to plan and to patiently pursue a new managerial pattern, but the benefits will be yours as you fulfill a rewarding career in Extension and experience a more rewarding personal life.