

It's About Time

Within any organisation, team, family or group of people it is usually possible to observe a wide range of attitudes to time. Some people are very aware of time and always know what time it is, how long activities will take and when events will happen. Some are very punctual, and are irritated by others being late - and most of us know someone who is always late! Some people get so absorbed in what they are doing right now that they 'lose all track of time'. Some people are good at planning ahead and some are not. Have you ever wondered how it is that people can have such different relationships with time?

Time is unusual amongst the range of things the average person has to manage. You can't see it; you can't hear it; you can't touch and feel it and it doesn't have any taste or smell. So the way that we normally find out about the world around us, that is, through our five senses, doesn't apply to time. And yet we all know about time and are able - to some extent - to deal with it successfully. We do this using our own personal timeline.

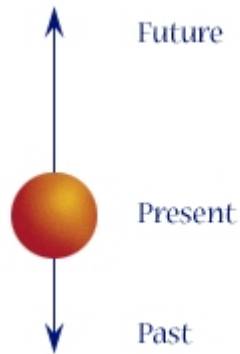
Your timeline is your mental picture of time. Given that we can't actually see time, it appears that we invent a mental picture to help us make sense of time. This usually happens in early childhood, at three or four years old. Anyone who has spent any time around a child of that age will probably remember watching that child slowly getting to grips with the concept of time, learning to 'tell the time', asking difficult questions like 'What's tomorrow?' (try explaining that in 3-year-old language!) and gradually forming some understanding of concepts like 'next week' and 'a long time ago'. The result of all this learning is the development of the timeline.

The timeline is usually out of conscious awareness and is so intrinsic to our personality that most of the time we don't pay any attention to it. Everyone's timeline is unique. However, there are some common features that can be observed and linked to behavioural patterns and habits.

At its most fundamental a timeline is usually a single line. At one end of the line is the past, at the opposite end is the future, and the present is somewhere in the middle. The principal variations come from the shape of the line (straight, curved, angled) and its position relative to you when you look at it.

As I said, every timeline is unique, but there are some frequently occurring forms. The two most common are shown below: (the best way to draw a timeline is to imagine that you are looking down on a person's head and then draw the timeline in relation to it)

Classic 'in-time' timeline



Classic 'through-time' timeline



If you were to find two people, one with each of the above 'classic' types of timeline, you would probably also find that they have completely different attitudes to time.

In-time

For example, the classic 'in-time' person will quite often be the life and soul of a party - you would never find them consulting a watch and saying 'my taxi is due in five minutes, I'd better go and find my jacket...' The in-time person will be in there having a great time, no matter what the time it is! At work, the same person will tend to get engrossed in whatever they are doing and lose all sense of time. A classic in-time person will probably be late for meetings (and everything else) and will be heavily dependent on a diary (or a secretary) to remind them of commitments. In extreme cases, the in-timer opens his diary on Monday morning, looks in disbelief at all the meetings planned for that week and wonders who booked all of them!

In-time people tend not to be instinctively good at planning; they don't 'see' the future clearly - it's hidden by today on their timeline. So if you ask an in-timer what she's doing next Saturday, she probably won't be able to tell you, either because she can't remember what she's committed to, or, more likely, because she hasn't committed to anything yet. In time people tend not to plan ahead. They like to keep their options open and not make promises they might not want to keep.

An in-time person focuses their attention on now and will usually find it easy to enjoy whatever opportunities come their way. They may find that they sometimes spend time doing things which, with hindsight, might not have been the most important thing to do at that time, but a true in-timer is as unconcerned with the past as with the future and will not lose any sleep over a missed chance. Doubtless it was an in-timer who coined the phrase 'put it behind you'.

As far as your average in-time person is concerned, the time is always now and tomorrow never comes. If you want to get the best out of them work on short

timescales, let them keep their options open and build time into your schedule in case they turn up late!

Through time

By contrast, the person with a through-time timeline is highly aware of time. If you question closely someone with this type of timeline, he will probably tell you that he visualises the timeline roughly at arm's length and approximately eye-level. The past is usually on the left and the future on the right and if you ask 'What are you doing next Saturday?' you may see his eyes flick across to the right as he consults his timeline, rather than his diary. Actually, this person doesn't need a diary. There are pictures along the timeline representing events in the past and future - a bit like having your entire life spread out on a gigantic wall planner!

As you might imagine, a classic through-time person tends to be very good at planning. Give them a project to do and a deadline date and they'll simply slot into the timeline all the necessary tasks to achieve the result. The trouble is, they usually then lose interest in it! Planning the future is far more real to a through-timer than dealing with today's 'things to do'. Sometimes they may have to think for a moment to know what today's date is. If you look at the diagram above, it's clear that a classic through-timer has very little connection with the present, they always see it in context with the past and future.

Mentally, we can each be anywhere on that line and the through-timer tends to spend a lot of time mentally in the past or the future. Focusing on and being present now is their big challenge. Problems from the past can haunt a through-timer. The problem will still be visible for quite some weeks or months after it happened. Try saying 'put it behind you' to a through-timer and you will discover just how meaningless that notion is to someone who experiences the past as being in front and to their left.

Through time people are also usually good at retrieving information about the past. If you have a through-time friend in your car and it's 'Golden Oldies' hour on the radio, they'll probably be able to tell you, for example, 'this record was in the charts in 1985, the same time as was doing my exams at...' They'll also remember the dates of birthdays and anniversaries, the last General Election, the next Grand Prix, the moon phases or time-related data of anything else they happen to be interested in. And they're usually punctual. At least, if they're late, they'll know it.

A through-time person never loses track of time, they look at their watch frequently, but in fact probably don't need to. If a real through-timer wakes up in the middle of the night, they will probably know what time it is without looking at the clock.

So, for your average through-timer, the most important question is 'When?' and the most interesting time is the future or the past, but rarely now. If you want to work successfully with one of these types make sure you have some timescales and

deadlines. Have a plan, or better still, ask them to create one. Stick to your agreed meeting times, don't change plans at the last minute and always be on time!

And the rest

On reading this, you may have recognised yourself as one of the classic types. Or more likely, you might have recognised bits of yourself in each. That may be either because your own timeline combines some of the features of both classic types, or it may be because you switch around from one style to the other depending on circumstances. It is not unusual, for instance, for a person to operate through-time at work and in-time at home. Also, many people have learned behaviour that doesn't come naturally. For example, in-timers are not naturally punctual, but anyone who has been in a job where punctuality was important will probably have developed a strategy for arriving on time. Similarly, just because a through-timer knows the time, doesn't mean she'll be punctual.

Many NLP texts will provide simple methods of discovering where your timeline is, if it hasn't already become clear. It is usually easiest to have someone else help you with this, because your timeline is stored unconsciously. One simple method is simply to establish rapport with the person whose timeline you want to elicit and then ask 'if I asked you point to the past, where would you point? And where would you point for the future? And where is the present?'

Whatever the shape and position of your timeline, it's still possible to designate it as either in-time or through-time. In general, if any portion of the timeline is behind the plane of your eyes (that is, behind you) then you will most likely show in-time characteristics. If the whole of your timeline is visible in front of you as you look at it, then you will probably demonstrate through-time characteristics.

There is a good correlation between your assessment as either in-time or through-time and your score on the Judger-Perceiver dimension of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. In-time people are Perceivers and through-timers are Judgers.

So far, this may simply appear to be simply another way of categorising people and labelling their behaviour. The useful thing about timelines is that it is possible to work with the timeline, which after all is 'just' a mental picture, albeit a very complex one, to produce changes in attitudes and behaviour.

For example, changing the direction or orientation of the timeline will produce a marked shift in the person's experience of time. If a through-time person changes their timeline so that the past is behind them and the future straight out in front like a classic in-time timeline, they will probably experience a narrowing of awareness, perhaps a feeling of lightness as they are able to 'put problems behind' them or a disconcerting feeling of not knowing what's going on!

The reverse intervention, from in-time to through-time, is used by some NLP-trained Drug Abuse Counsellors. People with drug abuse problems are usually in-timers. Through-timers are much too aware of the consequences of their actions to over-indulge in drugs or alcohol on a regular basis. So, by shifting the timeline of an addict, they are able to see their behaviour today, using drugs, in context with the past and future and become more aware of the destructive consequences of what they are doing. This can be a powerful addition to a drug rehabilitation programme.

Apart from changing the direction and location of the timeline, there are many other NLP-based interventions that utilise the timeline. The timeline is a storage system for our experiences and our plans and as such contains information about everything that ever happened to us. Some of that information may not be immediately accessible to conscious awareness, but by using the timeline as a pathway into the past it is possible to learn from early experiences and to reframe unpleasant experiences so that they no longer get in the way of us achieving what we desire in the present.

Your timeline is a basic building block of your personality. It's also a route to success.

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