**Balcony Time Article**

Far too many of us deal with our time like a five-year-old taking her hundred-pound dog for a walk. Driven by unpredictable, yelping de- mands, we feel incapable of doing anything to move our ministries in any direction. Our work becomes reduced to a series of erratic steps that takes us nowhere, each step a random replicate of the one before.

The few—the sustainable youth workers—who have been able to let go of the leash have one thing in common: they almost all practice bal- cony time*.* No time management tool is nearly as powerful, in our ex- perience, as this one. In balcony time, we step out of the wild, rushing current of *doing* ministry and step into a place where we actually *work on* our ministries.

It wasn’t long into my start in youth ministry when I realized I was expected to be an expert at things I knew nothing about. Where, I won- dered, was I supposed to have learned how to be an administrator, a manager, a strategist—all essential skills for longevity in ministry?

And where could I learn them?

The answer: in the balcony.

Balcony time is the time when we decide what frogs must be eaten first. Whether they’re aware of it or not, everyone with leadership responsibility for a youth ministry has all the following responsibilities, which only get attended to properly when there’s enough time in the balcony:

* recruiting all leaders for the current ministry as well as all leaders for next year’s ministry
* goal setting and strategic planning for the ministry
* getting (and keeping) parents, the senior pastor and the church lead- ers on your team
* keeping students connected
* developing a plan for discipling every youth in the ministry
* engaging youth in the life of the broader church
* being prepared for crises that youth and families may encounter
* having an intentional curriculum
* making sure youth events are well attended
* reading
* establishing a campus presence
* taking time to care for your own spiritual life
* taking time to rest

Though these items are the very ones most likely to move a youth ministry forward, they are also the ones most likely to be ignored.

Let me be clear. Balcony time is not the same as Sabbath time or devotional time. A Sabbath is a day off from work; balcony time is time *on,* but usually not at the office, where interruptions are likely to come every fifteen minutes. The balcony is the place where we take measures to ensure that our Sabbath time and time with God are protected.

It is in the balcony that we gain the perspective to work *on* our ministries, not just *in* them. In the balcony, we find the leverage to move our ministries forward; it’s in the balcony that we move out of a victim mentality and into the mindset of a leader; it’s in the balcony that we learn to say no to secondary priorities in order to attend to the most essential ones; it’s in the balcony that we *invest* time in our ministries rather than just *spend* time.

Here’s how it works: Balcony time begins by carving out a block of at least four hours each week. Sustainable youth workers promise them- selves that, during this time, they will not answer the phone, will not respond to emails, will not plan *this* week’s programs and will not seek to accomplish anything on the bulging urgent list. Though balcony time is not the place to work on this week’s top priorities, it is the place where we determine what those top priorities will be. It’s the place where we make the hard decisions about what things we’ll intentionally procrastinate about in the coming week.

I like to start my month by identifying the major chunks of time I’ll need to do the most important things, beginning with a weekly Sabbath day and three more four-hour blocks each week when I can be available to my family. The next step is to carve out an additional four-hour block each week for balcony time. All my meetings, phone calls and to-do lists get squeezed in around these priorities (Sabbath, family time and balcony time). Of course, the plan never works as neatly as it may look on paper—that’s another reason for balcony time. And it’s just one more reason we must also learn to become exceptional monkey managers.

From ***Sustainable Youth Ministry*** (InterVarsity Press), available through these links in [downloadable](http://www.ivpress.com/cgi-ivpress/book.pl/code%3D4107), [audio](http://www.ivpress.com/cgi-ivpress/book.pl/code%3D4107), or [print](http://www.ivpress.com/cgi-ivpress/book.pl/code%3D4107) format.