

Practical Leadership

*Improving the Schools of Today
Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow*

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Time Management

In a Nutshell

School leaders have complex jobs and face competing priorities for their time. Balancing managerial and instructional responsibilities, while maintaining an appropriate balance between professional work and one's personal life, can be a challenge. Despite the almost universal recognition that leaders need to manage their time wisely there is little research on practices that are most effective. What is known is that how a leader manages time impacts their job performance, their stress level and their personal life (Claessens, van Eerde, Rutte & Roe, 2007).

Time management consists of three behaviors---setting goals and priorities, the mechanics of organizing and doing one's job, and each individual's unique style and preferences (Macan, 1994). In other words, what works for one leader may not be useful for another. This recognition of the idiosyncratic nature of time management means there are all sorts of strategies to effective time management. The most effective approach is the one that works best for an individual leader.

Few jobs are as complex and involve as many different responsibilities as the school principalship. Managing them can, at times, seem overwhelming and principals often find themselves caught up in necessary but less important tasks. Managing the tasks is important because principals want to be seen as "staying on top" of things. Their reputation is often directly linked to their ability to juggle multiple priorities and accomplish multiple tasks at the same time.

While the research on time management is meager all sorts of time management tools and strategies emerge from the literature. These strategies generally include developing a clear set of priorities, organizing your tasks and identifying specific techniques to complete those tasks.

Step 1: Assess Where You Are and Where You Want to Be

Virtually all discussions about time management start with an assessment of one's work and priorities. The first step is to recognize the strengths and challenges of your current position. Clarifying where you are is an important step in beginning to change how you use time. Take a few minutes and assess your current situation.

Strengths	Challenges

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

The list of challenges, while often long, is most often not nearly as out of control as may be thought. Taking time to assess the current situation often proves to be a useful step in gaining “a dose of reality” about your situation.

Next, identify your most important responsibilities (Marshall, 2008). Then describe the tasks associated with those responsibilities. Covey (1996) describes these as the “big rocks” and suggests in *First Things First* that these tasks must always be taken care of first before other smaller, and less important tasks. Marshall suggests that these top priorities must be scheduled, or they will be neglected. Further, these top priorities or “big rocks” are the things that drive student learning. While every school is a little different, those priorities generally revolve around improving instruction and student learning. After identifying priorities, set measurable goals and focus your time and energy on achieving them.

It’s also suggested that a leader create a vision of how they want to spend their time. Imagine a day in which you are relaxed and productive. For example, if your work were completely effective, efficient, and balanced, what would your life be like? Create a statement that describes your vision. Some principals find it helpful to write the statement on an index card and put it in a visible place. That way it can be a daily reminder of the vision you hold for your work life (Williamson & Blackburn, 2009)

Here are some strategies that can help with this task.

- Select a week and carry a journal with you. Record how you spent time. This will help you identify how much you can get done and identify the most useful time as well as the most unproductive, or distracting, time.
- Take the first 30 minutes of every day to plan your day. Don’t start until the plan is completed. This activity helps focus the day and what you want to accomplish.
- Before every scheduled call or meeting take a couple minutes and clarify what you want to accomplish. It helps to identify what success looks like during the call or meeting. Similarly, take five minutes following every call or meeting to reflect and determine if you achieved the results you desired and to clarify next steps.
- Think about patterns in your day. For example, parents who typically come to school to see the principal do so at the beginning of the day, during lunch or at the end of the day. Anticipate those patterns and allot time for these visits (Robertson, 2006).
- If visitors arrive unannounced, greet them while standing. Standing tends to keep visits shorter than if the person is invited to sit (Tanner, Schnittjer & Atkins, 1991).

Step 2: Make a Mental Adjustment

Many principals feel overwhelmed with the responsibilities of their role. A person’s thoughts drive their feelings and actions. It can be helpful to start with an adjustment in how you think about what you are doing. Here are some examples.

From Negative Thought	To Positive Thought
I’ll never have an empty inbox.	I’m cleaning out my inbox every day.
I’ll never get caught up.	Today I choose to make progress on my task list.
It’s impossible to keep every body happy.	Every interaction I have with people will be sincere regardless of their behavior

Focus on the positive progress you make each day, whether it is effectively delegating a task or choosing to take time to mentor a potential leader. It is also helpful to review your vision on a regular basis. Either post your vision where you are reminded of it daily, or carry the index card with you. One principal wrote his vision on a sticky note and attached it on his computer where it was seen several times each day.

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Control Self-Interruption – There are lots of ways to distract yourself from what needs to be done. Distraction is most likely to occur when the task is unpleasant or requires energy or skills you lack at that moment. Distraction often comes from the organization of the office. Materials needed for a task should be organized and easily accessible. Leaving the office to retrieve materials invites distraction. If the interruption is mental fatigue, move around and stretch, take a short walk, eat a healthy snack or meditate for a few minutes (Ruder, 2008; Schmidt, 2004). Some principals schedule time for their own work and create blocks of time for high-priority work.

Do, Delegate or Delete – A critical mental adjustment is to recognize that every task doesn't need the principal to complete it. Think about the daily routine and consider what may detract from your productivity. Identify the tasks that you really must do, those that can be delegated to someone else and those that don't need to be done. This critical assessment often results in identifying non-essential tasks that detract from accomplishing the most essential tasks (Marygrove, 2012).

Delegation is so important to effective time management but so hard for many leaders. Trusting others to complete their work is critical. Many members of a school leadership team are willing to help out with some tasks. They may enjoy working on tasks matching their interest as a way of exploring their interest in a formal leadership position.

Only Handle It Once (OHIO) – One of the most prevalent time management suggestions is to read an e-mail, memo or message only once. Reading them multiple times multiplies the time you spend. It's more efficient to take a minute and decide what to do, and move it out of your inbox or off your desk. The only exception should be tasks that are delegated to another person (Hitch, 2008).

Just Say No – One of the hardest things for many leaders to do is to say no (Lovely & Smith, 2004). Leaders worry that people's feeling will be hurt or they will lose support. McCormack (2000) found that responding to four questions helps you master the art of saying no.

- Am I capable and qualified to do what's being asked?
- Do I have time for this task or activity?
- Do I want to do this activity?
- What are the ramifications of saying no?

Of course, always decline in a caring and inoffensive way. McCormack (2000) suggested these responses.

1. *I'm sorry, I simply can't right now.* – This implies an inability to assist because of circumstances beyond your control.
2. *I'm going to have to pass on that one.* – We all pass on opportunities, good and bad.
3. *Thanks for asking, but I'm unable to help you because . . .* – This response indicates you appreciate being thought of and provides a legitimate reason for declining.
4. *So-and-so can help you.* – This response shows confidence that others can support, problem solve and make decision.
5. *Maybe I can do that later.* – Used only as a last resort or you may receive a similar request in the future.

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Everything Is Not An Emergency – Remember that most emergencies are only in the eye of the beholder. Not every problem is a crisis, particularly if the problem resulted from someone else’s poor planning. Of course, authentic emergencies occur and you must respond but in many cases so-called emergencies do not require immediate attention (Lovely & Smith, 2004). Work towards minimizing urgent tasks. Flag them by creating a Tickler File, or other reminder, and allow plenty of time for completion.

Take Care of Yourself – Because the principalship is a demanding job it is important that principals invest in their own health, their personal relationships and their interests and avocations. Almost all principals are exhausted at the end of the day and good time management includes finding time for yourself and managing your own physical, emotional, mental and spiritual resources (Patterson, 2007). The very best, most effective caregivers are those that pay attention to their own needs and take care of their own physical and emotional health. Here are some common-sense suggestions (Marshall, 2008).

- Exercise faithfully (three times a week recommended).
- Eat the right foods starting with a healthy breakfast.
- Get enough sleep.
- Carve out time for relaxation and fun.
- Build a support system of friends, mentors and significant other.
- Orchestrate small and large wins to provide an extra shot of optimism and energy. Be comfortable rewarding yourself.

Step 3: Create or Identify Structures to Support Your Plan

The third step in good time management is to create a set of regular, consistent structures that will support your productivity. There is no one perfect strategy---except the one that works for you. However, there are several strategies that other principals have found effective.

Managing e-mail can be a major time management issue. Morgenstern (2005) suggests not checking it before 10am. She suggests that checking e-mail first thing each day allowed the e-mail to set the day’s agenda. Rather than responding to e-mail she encouraged using the first two hours of each day to work on your most important priorities rather than acting on the most recent request.

Here are another ten ideas worthy of consideration.

Create a “Tickler File” – Many of the responsibilities and tasks occur annually. A tickler file is a way of creating a reminder about the tasks to be anticipated, planned for and accomplished. For example, a high school principal will need to confirm graduation plans annually. Some principals use a set of file folders labeled by month and include items in the file of the tasks to be accomplished that month. Others use an electronic file to accomplish the same task. Some principals use a daily tickler file rather than a monthly file. Visit this site for more information - <http://frankbuck.blogspot.com/2014/01/the-secret-to-clean-desktop.html>

Use a Journal – Many principals maintain a running journal to take notes in meetings and create a “to do” list. This ensures that everything is in one place rather than on multiple pieces of paper or multiple sticky notes. A journal also makes it easy to look back and find ideas and tasks that emerged at earlier meetings. The journal may be either electronic or paper.

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Maintain a Single Calendar – Nothing can be more confusing and lead to missed commitments than the use of multiple calendars. One principal scheduled everything through her administrative assistant. Synching electronic calendars to computers that maintain your calendar should be a daily function.

Consider Your Biological Time Clock - Decision fatigue is a real phenomenon. It's important to consider when you do your best work and adjust your schedule to fit. For more information on *Decision Fatigue* see <http://gearup.ous.edu/sites/default/files/Research-Briefs/ResearchBriefDecisionFatigue.pdf>

Take control of E-mail - Check e-mail at set times, not all the time. If you can, respond when you first read a message. Handle them all as a group---start with the first and move through them until complete. Use descriptive subject lines to identify the substance of a message. Keep messages short and be clear about what response may be needed. Avoid checking your e-mail at night, on holidays, weekend or vacations (Healy, 2008). Turn off the automatic notification of your e-mail program. When it beeps, it distracts you from your work.

Establish Norms Around Access – Everyone wants an “open door,” but a literal open door can lead to fragmentation. Identify a quiet time each day to respond to e-mail. Don't reinforce the idea that you respond the moment you receive a message. Establish norms around interruptions. Work with your administrative assistant to protect time. While visibility is important, uninterrupted time to accomplish tasks is also important. Set blocks-of-time when you are not to be interrupted except in emergencies.

Organize Your Digital Life – As with e-mail and calendars, arrange computer files and documents so that information can be easily retrieved. Use a flash drive or external hard drive to back up work routinely.

Break Large Projects into Small Parts – Large projects can become overwhelming. Define the goal and create a series of tasks (smaller parts). Often these smaller parts are easier to accomplish and when completed help to move the larger project along.

Plan Weekly or Monthly – Many principals find it helpful to look at the “big picture” and plan either weekly or monthly. Taking this big look at tasks allows the leader to make decisions about the allocation of time.

Develop a Filing System – Use colored folders to distinguish tasks. One principal used a red folder to identify things requiring her signature, a green folder to hold new correspondence, yellow for pending activities, and blue for completed work and papers in need of filing. Such a system can work with your administrative assistant to organize tasks.

Other Interesting Considerations

The *Washington Post* recently reported on new research questioning the value of practices that principals have grown to accept, namely walkthroughs. They shared the findings from two studies (Grison, Loeb & Master, 2013; May, Huff & Goldring, 2012) that discovered a negative relationship between informal walkthroughs and student achievement especially in high schools. They found that time spent coaching teachers and engaging in more prolonged discussion of instruction were valuable. (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/01/08/should-principals-stop-visiting-classrooms/>)

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Final Thoughts

Juggling priorities can be challenging. Many principals report that setting a vision, adjusting their perspective, and creating a set of structures to support their goals are steps that help them take control of their work and manage time more effectively.

Online Resources

Principles of Time Management, Princeton University

<http://www.princeton.edu/mcgraw/library/for-students/effective-time-management/>

The McGraw Center at Princeton University identified ten crucial time management strategies.

The Big Rocks – Kim Marshall (2008)

<http://www.marshallmemo.com/articles/Time%20Management%20PL%20Mar%2008.pdf>

This article from *Principal Leadership* discusses the importance of identifying the most important tasks and provides a rubric for assessing your own time management.

Principals Offer Practical, Timely “Time Management” Tips

http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin436_a.shtml

This article from *Education World* offers suggestions from a panel of practicing principals about how they manage time.

5 Effective Time Management Tips for Principals (2012)

<http://onlinegrad.marygrove.edu/blog/bid/160242/5-Effective-Time-Management-Tips-for-Principals>

The Marygrove University principal preparation program provides these tips.

How Principals Manage Their Time is Key to Improving Instruction (2009)

<http://www.ernweb.com/educational-research-articles/how-principals-manage-their-time-is-key-to-improving-instruction-in-their-schools/>

This report sponsored by the Wallace Foundation reports on the link between time management and improved instruction.

Thirteen Timely Tips for More Effective Time Management – University of Nebraska

<http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/pages/publicationD.jsp?publicationId=860>

This report synthesizes the key ideas for effective time management.

How Principals Manage Time – Peggy Robertson (2006)

<http://www.naesp.org/resources/2/Principal/2006/N-Dp12.pdf>

This article from NAESP offers useful tips for managing time in schools with just one administrator.

Get Organized! Blog – <http://frankbuck.blogspot.com/>

Frank Buck, author of *Get Organized*, maintains this blog! *Time Management for School Leaders* provides useful strategies for taking control of time and balancing personal and professional responsibilities.

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar07/vol64/num06/The-Case-For-and-Against-Homework.aspx>

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Print Resources

Covey, S., Merrill, A. R. & Merrill, R. R. (1996). *First Things First*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Buck, F. (2008). *Get Organized! Time Management for School Leaders*. New York: Routledge Eye on Education.

Allen, D. (2001). *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*. New York: Viking.

Morgenstern, J. (2005). *Never Check E-Mail in the Morning and Other Unexpected Strategies for Making Your Work Life Work*. New York: Fireside Publishing.

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