

# How Leaders Accomplish More By Doing Less

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**W**hy do 40% of new executives fail within 18 months? One of the most helpful books that I've read on leading in an organization is Scott Eblin's *The Next Level: What Insiders Know About Executive Success*. Eblin points out that 40% of new executives fail within eighteen months of being named to their positions.

That's an incredible statistic.

One common response to this is to reference the Peter Principle—people have been promoted to their level of incompetence. But this doesn't make much sense. Most of these people are talented, bright, and motivated. It's unlikely that such a high percentage of them have been promoted beyond their ability.

What is actually going on? These struggling leaders are making a classic (but easy-to-understand) mistake: when they assumed their new leadership positions, they kept doing the same things that got them there. They didn't realize that leadership is different than management and, even more significantly, than individual contribution.

By acting like an individual contributor in a leadership role, they ended up doing all the wrong things. And they probably did those tasks extremely well, since it was their capacity for individual contribution and management that likely had gotten them promoted in the first place. But now those tasks have kept these new leaders from leading.

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*“High performers are often elevated to the executive level and then left to figure out on their own how to operate successfully in their new roles.”*

SCOTT ELBIN

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## **DON'T CONFUSE THE ROLES OF THE PRODUCER AND THE LEADER**

Typically, people reach positions of formal leadership because they have proven themselves as fantastic individual contributors. For example, they have done excellent work coding pages for the website (an individual contributor task), and so they were promoted to head up the whole web division (a leadership task).

However, at the higher levels of an organization, you don't succeed primarily because of your abilities to do the work as an individual contributor. Rather, your success depends on how you set direction, align your team, and give thought to the direction of the whole organization, department, or endeavor.

If you keep focusing on doing the work yourself, you will neglect the unique responsibilities of your role. Furthermore, if you keep trying to do the things you did as an individual contributor, you won't have time to lead at all.

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## THERE ARE GOOD THINGS YOU HAVE TO STOP DOING IN ORDER TO LEAD WELL

That's the main takeaway here. I am not saying that you need to start leading in addition to acting as an individual contributor. To lead you need to stop doing many of your former functional responsibilities.

If you're trying to keep up with your functional responsibilities, those tasks will interfere with your leadership tasks.

There is balance here, of course. As a leader, you still have some responsibilities as an individual contributor. But your primary area of focus needs to be *leadership* tasks, not individual contributor tasks.

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## **LEADERSHIP: SETTING DOWN RESPONSIBILITY FOR A FEW RESULTS AND PICKING UP ACCOUNTABILITY FOR MANY RESULTS**

According to Eblin, executive leadership requires “setting down responsibility for few results and picking up accountability for many results.”

To be responsible for something is to be involved in the details. You are either completing tasks yourself or closely involved in directing those who are. Obviously, this doesn't scale—if you are closely involved with all the details on a project, you won't have the time to deal with a wide range of projects.

To be accountable, on the other hand, is to be answerable for the results that the other people on your team achieve. Since you aren't in the details doing things, this scales—you can be accountable for many things, which is exactly what any leadership role requires.

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### TO ACCOMPLISH MORE, DO LESS

A leader needs to accomplish more than she did as an individual contributor, not less. And that's the precise reason she needs to stop acting like an individual contributor.

When you lead, your efforts are multiplied through the influence you have on the contributions of others. As a leader, you need to spend less time on individual projects and more time working across the scope of the organization or, if your role is informal, the movement.

As Andy Stanley has said, if you are a leader, you need to “spend the majority of your time at the thirty-thousand-foot level while remaining accessible to team members who are closer to the action. Spend more time strategizing and less time problem solving.”[1]

But our personal productivity practices can actually get in the way of doing this.

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## HOW GETTING THINGS DONE CAN PREVENT YOU FROM LEADING

The project lists and action lists involved in most productivity approaches (such as David Allen's GTD method) tend to put our focus on our own individual contribution.

When looking at our next actions, for example, it's easy to assume we need to do them ourselves. While that's often easier and quicker (at first), we end up settling into an individual contributor model when we should be thinking more broadly about our team and the culture of the entire organization.

This is especially true if you work for an organization that is perennially short staffed, like a non-profit or a ministry.

I experienced this exact scenario. At one time, I was leading three departments in an organization. I was managing the church and conference bookstores, launching a nationwide radio program, and leading the web department. This was a lot to manage at once, and I was frequently pulling all-nighters.

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The biggest reason for these long hours and all-nighters (aside from the fact that I really enjoyed what we were doing) was that I was doing a lot of work myself. I had small teams in each department but didn't have nearly the number of people I needed. So I filled this gap by doing a lot of the work right along with my team. I even put up a line of slatwall for shelving in our bookstore by myself. As anyone who has put up slatwall knows this is a job for at least two or three people—doing it by yourself is ridiculous!

Now, leaders should sometimes or even frequently work alongside their teams. But this shouldn't be the main thing the leader does. A leader needs to be setting direction, looking out ahead, and aligning people.

I don't want to be too dogmatic here—in a very real sense, due to the small number of people I had to work with, I had no other choice. But the size of my team wasn't the only reason for all those hours I was putting in. The other reason is that I simply thought that this is what it meant to do my work. I knew that leading my teams was important. That being said, no one had ever told me that in order to lead well, you have to stop doing so much of the work yourself.

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My personal productivity tools only contributed to this. It's certainly not the fault of those tools, but my natural reaction to seeing 100 next actions and 50 projects is to think of them as actions I must do, rather than things to delegate. If we aren't aware of this danger, we're much more likely to fall into this trap.

### **ADAPTING GETTING THINGS DONE FOR LEADERSHIP**

So how do we use our productivity system to maximize, rather than detract from, our leadership? There are two main solutions:

#### *1. Delegation*

The first way is to simply have a mindset of meaningful delegation. We need to avoid overloading ourselves with projects and next actions by delegating instead of doing everything ourselves.

While this sometimes means assigning one-off tasks to others on your team, the more effective approach is to delegate entire areas of responsibility. This scales much more effectively because you don't need to be in the details. It also protects your time from delegating endless individual tasks and allows people on your team to grow and exercise responsibility.

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## *2. Project and Organizational Dashboard*

The second approach is more exciting. I recommend assessing roles from the 30,000-foot level. Instead of just creating a roles checklist for yourself, create an organizational chart for your department (or, if you are in top management, your whole organization). Then, every week or so, review the org chart and reflect on what actions you can proactively take to keep things going in the right direction or to help someone else be more effective.

This is the type of thing you're probably already doing in your mind, but creating a checklist or visual chart helps us be more intentional and proactive about it. Reviewing the org chart visually can help you come up with new ideas and identify things you might not otherwise have seen. To keep this in motion, I recommend creating a weekly repeating task or integrating it into your weekly review.

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### **BUT SHOULDN'T WE ALL LEAD WHERE WE ARE?**

There are many different types of leadership roles and, as Mark Sanborn has pointed out, you don't even need a title to be a leader.[2] Leadership doesn't equal a role on the top leadership team or even necessarily any formal authority. While we've been focusing on that form of leadership in this article, that is not the only kind of leadership. Leadership, at its essence, is influence. This means you can lead wherever you are.

No matter where you are leading from, these principles are still important because leading where you are involves more than just doing your work. You need to look outward, develop networks, motivate people, and rally them to a better future.

If you're an individual contributor, these tasks are things you need to do beyond your individual work. This means you still need to be careful about the tendency to get pulled into too narrow of a focus on your own work.

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## IF YOU WANT TO BE MAXIMALLY PRODUCTIVE, LEAD

A friend of mine who is a pastor emailed me, asking for the top book on productivity that I'd recommend for a busy pastor. I answered with a book on leadership, not productivity. Here's part of the email which shows why:

“For a busy pastor, if I can only recommend one book, I'd actually recommend a book on leadership, because even if you get productivity down well, your efforts only scale widely through leadership. Personal productivity is necessary to make one's leadership as effective as it should be; personal productivity hits a dead end without leadership.”

One book on leadership that I'd recommend for a pastor would be *Next Generation Leader: 5 Essentials for Those Who Will Shape the Future* by Andy Stanley. Stanley “gets it” when it comes to leadership, and as a pastor he has a biblical perspective that informs his thinking.

I also recommend “What Leaders Really Do” by John Kotter. It's the best article on leadership I've ever read.

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## 5 TIPS FOR BUSY LEADERS

Let's face it: Leaders tend to be busy. There are always more things to do, ideas to implement, and projects to manage. Here are five essential things to keep in mind as you aim to effectively lead your team, organization, business, or church.

*(1) Make the good of others your primary aim.*

This is a core principle of productivity, and it applies to leadership as well. Leadership is not about you. It is about serving others, building them up, and making them more effective.

We should lead this way because it's right and because it's the way Jesus teaches us to lead:

But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

(Matthew 20:25-28)

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We also see this in 1 Peter 5:4, where Peter exhorts the elders and leaders in the church to serve as “examples to the flock” rather than “domineering over those in your charge.” Since we serve a Savior who humbled himself to die for us, surely our own leadership should be focused on humbly serving those we lead.

Through God’s good design, this is also the more rewarding way to lead. It is far more fun to invent ways to help others thrive and grow than it is to conceive plans for our own private advancement.

Beyond that, you’ll find it actually makes you more effective because it unlocks the essential ingredient for true leadership: trust. Mark Sanborn explains this perfectly:

When people know you are interested in their best interests, and in helping them meet their needs, they will trust you. It’s human nature. And that genuine interest in helping others and making a positive difference is the essence of leadership.

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Contemporary leadership thinkers aren't the only proponents of servant leadership. Speaking over 250 years ago, Jonathan Edwards wrote:

Especially will the spirit of Christian love dispose those that stand in a public capacity, such as that of ministers, and magistrates, and all public officers, to seek the public good. . . . It will make them watchful against public dangers, and forward to use their powers for the promotion of the public benefit; not being governed by selfish motives in their administration; not seeking only, or mainly, to enrich themselves, or become great, and to advance themselves on the spoils of others, as wicked rulers very often do, but striving to act for the true welfare of all to whom their authority extends.[4]

On the other hand, Edwards also condemned the sin of those who, “if clothed with authority, carry themselves very injuriously toward those over whom their authority extends, by behaving very assumingly and magisterially and tyrannically toward them.”[5]

Those you lead are not there to serve you. You are there to serve them. This is how Jesus himself led (Matthew 20:28). Why should your leadership role be different?

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*(2) Turn the work over to your team.*

You cannot give attention to the true tasks of leadership unless you let your team focus on managing and executing the tactical work.

There are times for leaders should roll up their sleeves and help with the work, as Jesus himself did when he washed his disciples' feet on the way to the cross (John 13:12-17).

However, the primary task of the leader is to set direction, align, and motivate—not primarily create plans and do the specific work tasks. We don't succeed at the executive level because of additional functional strengths. We have to turn the work over to our teams—even if they can't do it as well as we can at first.

*(2b) Pastors, don't turn over preaching and teaching.*

It might be tempting for a pastor to think, "Okay, if my primary task is leadership, then I need to hand off more preaching and teaching so I can focus on leading the staff." This would be a mistake.

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The focus of the pastoral role should be shepherding (leading) the flock through prayer and the ministry of the Word.

In other words, pastors lead by preaching and teaching. This means that you should not reduce your preaching and teaching load so you can do more staff leadership and administrative work. Rather, you should reduce your administrative work so you can devote even more time to preaching and teaching.

Pastors are not an exception to the importance of leadership. When we assume that, we are thinking of leadership only through the CEO model. But pastoral leadership is practiced primarily through the ministry of the Word and prayer. Pastors are not an exception to the things I am saying on leadership: Rather, these things actually protect the true nature of the pastoral role.

One nuance here: Larger churches often have an executive pastor who leads the staff, as well as many other roles that other pastors fulfill, such as small group ministries and family discipleship ministries. That's not a bad thing—that's a role designed to lead the team of church leaders well. But for pastors leading the congregation directly through preaching, that preaching is their leadership.[6] (And, even so, the executive pastor should place a heavy emphasis on teaching in his contexts as well.)

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*(3) Take time to think.*

A leader needs to take time to step back, get to the 30,000-foot level, and reflect. All good leaders do this. They process what has happened, plan new and better ways to do things, keep their eyes on the big picture, and just plain think.

Leadership requires reflection. The best leaders tend to be the best thinkers.

You need to find your own way to do it, but you need to build this into your life as a discipline. For many leaders, virtually all downtime tends to become thinking time. Or you might combine thinking with exercising like Jonathan Edwards, going for long walks to spend time in prayer and thought. The key is that you create time to think regularly.

Beyond the ordinary time you take to think during the course of a week, I'd also suggest taking several days every quarter or six months to go somewhere secluded and read and reflect on major issues across a broad range of topics.

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Bill Gates exemplifies this in his famous “think weeks,” when he takes a seven-day stretch of seclusion to ponder the future of technology and then apply those thoughts to Microsoft. Now that his efforts are turned primarily toward his foundation, I doubt that his focus is still the future of technology. But what better way to contribute to the solutions for large global problems than to spend a week thinking about new and better ways to address them?

You can do the same for the problems—and, even more, opportunities—in your organization. But don’t merely contemplate. Draw conclusions. That’s the point of thinking. Those who ponder, ponder, and ponder some more, without ever coming to a position on things, will be ill equipped to bring much insight and help to others.

*(4) Connect.*

Leaders need time not only time to think, but also to connect with people. It should be a top priority to connect not only with the people in your organization or primary sphere of influence, but also with people across your industry, movement, marketplace, or area.

Take the time to stay in close touch with the people you serve and to develop networks of relationships.

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Conferences are a great place to spend time thinking and connecting with others. This is incredibly effective because leaders are able to share their ideas and see them refined and improved by others. In fact, this is the purpose of conferences: Connect with others and share ideas.

This means that attending conferences should be a priority. They are not a bonus expense, as something to do only if extra money is in the budget. The value that comes from making connections, having time to think, being exposed to new ideas, and refining your ideas is immeasurable. If you work for a non-profit or a church, you will find that conferences radically expand your ability to accomplish your mission. On the other hand, if you work in business, there is a strong case to be made that attending good conferences actually generates revenue.[7]

*(5) Don't ignore the condition of your soul.*

Character is at the heart of both productivity and leadership.

Andy Stanley points out, "Without character you won't be a leader worth following. Character provides the moral authority necessary to bring together the people and resources needed to further an enterprise.... Character is the source of your moral authority." [8]

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You need to keep your walk with God vibrant and growing. Again, Stanley captures this well: “To become a leader worth following, you must be intentional about developing the inner man. You must invest in the health of your soul. Nobody plans to fail, especially leaders. But to ignore the condition of your soul is the equivalent of planning to fail.”[9]

But be encouraged, because you aren’t left to develop your character on your own:

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.” (Titus 2:11-14)

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# CORE POINT

If you confuse the role of the producer and leader, you will ruin your ability to lead.

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# KEY QUOTE

“You have to stop the corporate equivalent of cutting the grass yourself and instead hire a lawn service. Your work is to oversee the process, stay accountable to your customers, and begin planning your extension of the landscaping business.”

–Andy Stanley

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# APPLICATION

Reflect on the portion of what you do that makes the biggest difference, and start focusing the majority of your efforts there. For the leader these should be things that focus on the 30,000-foot level as much as possible, that are within your core strengths, and that provide the biggest impact.

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# FURTHER RESOURCES

- Scott Eblin, *The Next Level: What Insiders Know About Executive Success*, 2nd Edition.
  - Hans Finzel, *The Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make*, chapter 2, “Putting Paperwork Before Peoplework.”
  - John Kotter, “What Leaders Really Do,” Harvard Business Review.
  - Andy Stanley, *Next Generation Leader: 5 Essentials for Those Who Will Shape the Future*.
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Matt is an author, speaker, and consultant eager to help you do work that matters and do it better. More than that, he wants to help you do your work and influence the culture in a gospel-centered way. Matt is the author of *What's Best Next* and *Creating a Business Plan that Actually Works*.



Visit [WhatsBestNext.com](https://WhatsBestNext.com) for more resources on leading, creating, and getting things done.



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# SOURCE NOTES

[1] Andy Stanley, *Next Generation Leader*.

[2] See his excellent book *You Don't Need a Title to Be a Leader: How Anyone, Anywhere, Can Make a Positive Difference*.

[3] Mark Sanborn, *You Don't Need a Title to be a Leader* (64). Keith Ferrazzi gets this as well: "Do you understand that it's your team's accomplishments, and what they do because of you, not for you, that will generate your mark as a leader?" (*Never Eat Alone*, 57). That's a critical difference: what they do because of you, rather than simply for you. He also adds: "I realized that my long-term success depended on everyone around me. That I worked for them as much as they worked for me" (58).

[4] Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits: Christian Love as Manifested in the Heart and Life*, 170-171.

[5] Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits* (169). Note that servant leadership is not a recent innovation in leadership theory. It's taught and modeled in the Bible, and writing more than 200 years ago it was affirmed by one of the greatest theologians the church has ever produced.

[6] I know some people say the concept of "senior pastor" is not in the Bible. I do believe, as Alexander Strauch argues in *Biblical Eldership*, that all elders are equal in authority but as he also points out, one elder typically stands out as "first among equals," and there may be different reporting relationships within the pastoral staff.

[7] See my post, "Is Attending Conferences an Unnecessary Expense?" <http://www.whatsbestnext.com/2010/03/is-attending-conferences-an-unnecessary-expense/>

[8] Andy Stanley, *The Next Generation Leader*.

[9] *Ibid.*

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