



HOW LEADERS ACCOMPLISH MORE BY DOING LESS

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A wrong understanding of getting things done can get in the way of your ability to lead. To put it more strongly, it's possible for a focus on personal productivity to ruin your ability to lead.

WHY 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 percent 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 actually 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 is that these people 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 being an individual contributor.

By acting like an individual contributor in a leadership role, they ended up doing all the wrong things. And they probably did them extremely well, for it was their capacity for individual contribution and even management that likely got them promoted to more formal leadership in the first place. But this backfired and undermined their effectiveness.

*"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*

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 as an individual contributor (your abilities to do the work). 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. In fact, if you keep trying to do the things you did as an individual contributor, you simply won't have time to lead at all.

*IF YOU KEEP DOING ALL THE THINGS
YOU DID AS A CONTRIBUTOR,
YOU WON'T HAVE TIME TO LEAD.*

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. Rather, you have to stop doing many of your former functional responsibilities in order to lead.

If you keep trying to do your functional responsibilities, those individual contribution tasks will interfere with your leadership tasks.

There is nuance here, of course. It's not that the leader has no responsibilities as an individual contributor. But his primary area of focus needs to be leadership tasks, not individual contributor tasks.

MAKING EFFECTIVE DECISIONS

It's surprising how often we approach important decisions haphazardly. Here are four steps to intentional decision making:

1. Understand the objectives
2. Evaluate the alternatives
3. Consider the risks
4. Make the decision

Make sure to consider what you really want—the ideal—before considering the constraints. You will almost always have to compromise, but you'll never know the right compromises to make if you don't know the ideal you're aiming for.

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 doing it directly or closely involved in directing those who are. Obviously, this doesn't scale—if you are closely involved with all the details, you won't have the time to deal with a lot of things.

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.

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. Thus, the leader needs to spend less time on individual projects and more time working across the scope of the organization or, if his or her role is informal, the movement.

This means that, 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.

HOW GETTING THINGS DONE CAN INADVERTENTLY PREVENT YOU FROM LEADING

All the project lists and action lists involved in most productivity approaches (such as David Allen’s GTD method) tend to put your focus on your own individual contribution.

When looking at your next actions, for example, it’s easy to assume that “I better do these things.” Since it’s often easier and quicker to do these things ourselves (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.

And this is especially the case if you work for an organization that might be perennially short-staffed, like a non-profit or a ministry.

This is exactly what happened to me. 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.

The biggest reason for these long hours and all-nighters (aside from the fact that I really enjoyed what we were doing) is that I was doing a lot of work myself. I had a team of a few people in each area 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 slat wall for shelving in our bookstore by myself. As anyone who has put up slat wall knows, this is a job for at least two or three people—doing it by yourself is ridiculous!

Now, leaders should sometimes, frequently even, work alongside his or her team. 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 these 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, but no one had ever told me that in order to do this well, you have to stop doing so much of the work yourself.

Utilizing Allen's *Getting Things Done* approach only contributed to this. It's certainly not the fault of GTD, 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 actually use our productivity system to enhance, rather than detract from, our leadership? There are two main solutions.

1. Delegation

The first way is to simply have the right mindset. We need to avoid overloading ourselves with projects and next actions that we need to personally execute by properly delegating.

While this sometimes means assigning one-off tasks to others on your team, the most effective approach is to delegate entire areas of responsibility. This scales and is much more effective because you don't need to be in the details. It also protects your time from tasks that you would have received and then delegated.

Through delegation you can decrease the amount of specific tasks you have to deal with, protecting more time for your unique leadership tasks.

2. Project and Organizational Dashboard

The second approach is more exciting. I recommend taking the concept of the 20,000-foot level of roles and, instead of just creating a roles checklist for yourself, creating 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, and so forth.

This is the type of thing you're probably already doing in your mind, but creating a checklist or visual chart brings a level of proactive intentionality to 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.

BUT SHOULDN'T WE ALL LEAD WHERE WE ARE?

Now, 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 equate to having a role on the top leadership team or even necessarily having any formal authority at all. We've been focusing on that form of leadership in this article, but it is not the only kind of leadership. Leadership, at its essence, is influence.

This means you can lead wherever you are. But these principles are still important, even if you're not in a formal leadership role in your organization, 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, which means you still need to be careful about the tendency to get pulled into a narrow focus on your own work.

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.

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 is the same with leadership. 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 it's the way the Scriptures teach us to lead (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-3). But it's also true that this is 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.

And, beyond that, you'll find it actually makes you more effective because it unlocks the essential ingredient for true leadership: *trust*. Mark Sanborn nails this:

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.^[3]

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 spoke of 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). How could you see your role as being any different?

(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.

I'm not saying leaders should avoid all menial work. Jesus himself showed us that is not the case by washing his disciples' feet on the way to the cross (John 13:12-17). But 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. You have to turn the work over to your team—even if they can't do it as well as you at first.

(2b) For 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.

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

The right application of this for pastors, then, is not that they should reduce their preaching and teaching load so they can do more staff leadership and administrative work. Rather, it is that they should reduce their administrative work so they can devote even more time to preaching and teaching.

Some people think that pastors are an exception to the importance of leadership. They think that a focus on leadership leads to a pastor as the CEO model. This is incorrect. Pastoral leadership is practiced primarily through the ministry of the Word and prayer. And thus 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: In larger churches, there is often an executive pastor who leads the staff, and you have many other roles that other pastors fulfill as well (small group ministries, family discipleship ministries, etc.). I am not saying that's bad. The role of the executive pastor, for example, is primarily to lead the staff. I am talking here about the primary preaching and teaching pastor—which includes the senior pastor.^[6] (And, even so, the executive pastor should place a heavy emphasis on preaching and teaching in his contexts as well.)

(3) Take time to think.

A leader needs to take time to step back, get up on the balcony, and reflect. All good leaders do this. They process what has happened, think of new and better ways to do things, make sure they keep their eye 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 down time 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 and do it 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 and across a broad range of topics.

Bill Gates exemplifies this in his famous “think weeks,” where 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, most of all, opportunities—in your organization.

But don't merely think. 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 needed to stay in close touch with the people you serve and to develop networks of relationships.

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 how they are refined and improved by others. This, in fact, is the purpose of conferences: connect with others and share ideas.

Some people regard attending conferences as a bonus expense, as something to do if extra money is in the budget, but do not prioritize it otherwise. I couldn't disagree more. The value that comes from making connections, having time to think, being exposed to new ideas, and refining your ideas is invaluable. If you work for a non-profit or a church, you will find that conferences radically expand your ability to accomplish your mission. And 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 gets this right when he points out that “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]

This means 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. 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)

CORE POINT

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

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

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 20,000- or 30,000-foot level as much as possible, that are within your core strengths, and that provide the biggest impact.

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. A co-founder of What's Best Next, Matt is the author of What's Best Next and Creating a Business Plan that Actually Works.

Visit WhatsBestNext.com for more on leading, creating, and getting things done.

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.