Leading-Managing-Doing
A Balancing Act
by Brian McDonald

As a leader you want to make sure that your organization is successful both today and tomorrow, whether you are in charge of a unit of four or you head a multi-layered organization of several hundred staff. You don’t want to be the leader who fails to anticipate shifts in the market for your products or services, or does not develop your organization’s operational capabilities to meet future demands. You want to be the leader who sees the future clearly and helps steer the organization around shoals, both predictable and unpredictable, so that your “customers” are satisfied – in the short run and into the future. In other words, you want to function more as a “strategic leader” in addition to fulfilling your other, more tactical and perhaps even less important responsibilities.

To accomplish this, you must arrange your working life to have enough time to think, plan, and reflect about the future needs of your organization, its ever-changing technological and societal environment, and its capacity to meet these new needs. However, finding the time to accomplish this is often daunting given how demanding the workday can be, let alone attending to the additional, understandable demands placed on you by family and friends. As for having any time for yourself to ensure that your life is balanced and healthy, well that seems even more challenging in our connected world.

Let’s just focus on your workday. You either become a frazzled 24/7 workaholic, with no time to think, to plan, or to reflect or you take control of your day. In today’s always-connected global environment, someone somewhere is always picking up the phone or sending an e-mail message, or hosting a teleconference. As a result, too many managers are overwhelmed by their day-to-day demands. The phone rings. There is the steady and relentless flow of e-mail crashing onto your computer screen. They all are saying “read me, read me, now, now!” Bosses, subordinates, and peers pop up at your door, usually unannounced, with a plaintive “This will just take a minute...” which, of course, is never the case. And, when others are not intruding – unplanned, unannounced and often needlessly – upon your time, you have other, more predictable demands: meetings to prepare for and attend, conference calls that you cannot avoid; individuals you need to see; letters and reports to write; meetings with staff you feel are necessary in order to further the mission of your unit. And, the list goes on. So, whether others or you, yourself, are taking up your time and
doing so in ways that may not always be the most effective and efficient, the bottom line is that often, you do not have enough time to do your own work. This is why you may end your day wondering what happened to the last 10, or maybe even 12, hours. As for having time to think, reflect and plan, well, once again, that seems like a luxury.

Let’s look at this a little more closely. How does your time get spent? We all know that it flies, but where does it go?

First, it’s important to understand that regardless of what our formal position or role is within our organization, each unit of our time – whether a minute or an hour or a day – is usually spent attending to activities related to: **LEADING, MANAGING, or DOING**.

**LEADING** is when we focus on the more strategic aspects of our role – essentially planning for the future. Leading involves tracking external trends, anticipating future needs, developing a vision and strategies to achieve goals, engaging others in formulating and undertaking strategic pursuits, and building organizational capabilities required for the future. All this work requires engaging and coaching our staff and others who are crucial to bringing about the changes needed for the organization to be successful in an ever-shifting environment.

**MANAGING** is when we work with others to organize, allocate, and coordinate people and processes to obtain desired outcomes. For example, drafting goals and operational plans, allocating resources, submitting budgets, and “managing” individuals and teams by assigning responsibilities, developing policies, procedures, and systems to monitor implementation.

**DOING** refers to the actual “doing” of the task. Often, these tasks represent work such as collecting data for a report, providing help of a routine nature, developing a simple business process, dealing with day-to-day email and phone calls. Many of these tasks can and should be delegated to staff reducing your work while giving staff opportunities to learn and grow.

Before you can decide whether your mix of time spent leading, managing, and doing is the most optimum combination, it is important to calculate approximately what percentage of your time currently goes to each activity. There is no “one size fits all”
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for how leaders should apportion their time since the right balance varies from individual to individual, and from role to role. Nonetheless, the odds are that given your role, you spend relatively less time leading than would be useful to the organization – probably far less than you spend either managing or doing. If you are going to help your organization meet the challenges ahead, you will have to adjust those percentages by increasing the time you spend leading and, most likely, managing as well.

To accomplish this will require strategies designed to reduce, or at the very least contain, the amount of time you actually spend doing the work. If not, your day will continue to be dominated by the immediate, but not necessarily important, demands that others – and you – impose upon you. These prevent you from addressing the most important tasks and issues facing you. Much of the constant stream of email, IM, meetings, interruptions, and crises de jour eliminate time that could be better used for reflection and focusing on the most important. In sum, many of us should spend less time doing the work so we will have more time to lead. And, if we do not lead more – and encourage others to lead more our organizations will not be prepared for tomorrow and tomorrow’s challenges.

So, how can this be accomplished? How can we “do less?” How do we both prevent others and ourselves from creating a frenzied workday that inhibits our ability to get anything done?
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Four steps to help you lead more and do less:
Here are four steps that will help you reduce the amount of time you spend doing and increase the amount of time available for leading and thus, for helping you meet your organization's future needs:

1. Be clear in setting your priorities. What are your top 3 to 5 priorities?
2. Reduce the amount of time spent doing by handing some of these “doing” tasks off to others – that is, by delegating.
3. Ensure that you have sufficient resources – of the right kinds – to get your organization's tasks done now that you will be “doing” less.
4. Become more efficient in how you use your time.

Let's take each of these approaches in turn.

1. Be clear in setting your priorities.

What are the important “things” – priorities – you need to pursue? What goals are most important to accomplish? What projects need to be initiated, which ones finished? What issues need to be confronted and resolved – things that you need to ensure are accomplished? This is not only a matter of deciding how you are going to spend your time; it's also a question of gaining control over your time in the first place. The unfortunate reality of life at the workplace is that if you don’t have a clear set of your priorities, you will be reacting to others, rather than driving the agenda.

You’ll need a list of your tasks – at least a rough one. Order your tasks in terms of importance so you can spend your time only on the important ones, whether immediate or not. This means that you must always remember that just because a task is immediate – that is, it should be done soon, perhaps even right away – doesn’t make it important. At least, not important for you to do. If it’s just immediate but not important, it’s a perfect candidate to be handed off to one of your staff. You should first focus on only the important tasks, whether they are immediate or not. And since the important tasks are more often than not going to be strategic and long-term in their implications, focusing on the important means that you will be leading more and doing less.
2. Reduce the amount of time spent doing by handing some of these “doing” tasks off to others – that is, by delegating.

One obvious strategy for reducing the amount of time you spend “doing” is to delegate some of the less important tasks – especially the less important but immediate ones – to others. Unfortunately, this is a strategy leaders understand they should follow but often avoid putting into practice.

All of these concerns may have some validity but none of them justify not pursuing delegation as a general strategy. The most that can be said for these excuses is that they may apply to a particular task at a particular time. Nonetheless, if you are serious about reducing the amount of time you spend “doing” you must hand off specific responsibilities – often work on unimportant tasks or at least tasks that do not require your level of expertise and skill – to others. What work are you attending to that is below your pay grade? Leaders who delegate quickly discover that other members of their staff can perform many of the “doing” tasks such as attending routine meetings (with agreement by the meeting owner), returning certain phone calls, supervising administrative staff, handling email, and writing the more straightforward and less demanding reports.

But even leaders committed to delegating have to be aware of two potential concerns that can limit the pay-off. First, when you delegate a task, the tendency may be to look over the recipient’s shoulder. Are they really doing the task correctly – which sometimes means are they doing it the way you want them to do it or you would do it if you were performing the task? Why is it taking them so long? Why did they not consult A or meet with B? Their whole approach is wrong. Or so you think.
If delegation is going to work for you – and for your staff – you have to back off a bit and show confidence in your staff. You do not have to check up on everyone. You do not have to review every draft of the report, require daily updates, check their figures, hold their hands, rap their knuckles, etc. However, you do have to do what good leaders do – set direction, establish priorities, and hold your staff accountable. And, the degree you do this will depend upon the capabilities of the staff who now have responsibility for the work. But by micro-managing or doubting their every move, you defeat your very objective of building up their capability. Don’t go there. Not only is it not very productive for you, it is also not very helpful for them. Remember that there’s nothing that will sap initiative, lower morale, and produce less work than an overbearing, micro-manager.

Delegation does not always mean just shunting off the routine, low-discretion work to others while you retain all the “decider-type” tasks. For at least two reasons, it’s important that you encourage others to make decisions. First, unless you give the staff member to whom you have delegated the task explicit approval to complete the task without any further involvement by you, delegation is just delaying when you become involved. Equally important, empowering others to make decisions gives them greater ownership of the goal or the project. The end result is that they’ll put more effort into accomplishing the task, do it better, and they will feel greater satisfaction from developing the confidence that will come from having justified your faith in their abilities.

There’s a second caveat. Be aware of taking on the work of staff who are more than willing to have you do their work, whether it be their normal duties or work you have previously delegated to them. Some staff are extremely effective in “reverse delegation.” That is, giving back to you the work that had previously been delegated to them, or even more alarming, attempting to let you do what has always been their work. At the very least, staff are often all too willing to “share” their duties with their managers, either because of an understandable inability to do the work – which happens when they have not been trained to do the work or are not given enough time to perform the task – or because they are incompetent or lazy. Either way, it’s your job to make sure they do their work, with whatever assistance and supervision is necessary.

Surprisingly often, however, it’s not the staff members’ fault. Micro-managers or insecure leaders will practically invite their staff to hand over work the staff member can and should do. These leaders feel that no one can perform the task as well as they can and because of this, they will be better served doing the task themselves. Perhaps they were brought up where the adage, “If you want a job done right, do it yourself” was the mantra. This is not a philosophy you as a leader should follow. If your staff is not capable, then either you or your predecessors have hired poorly or failed to manage performance effectively. Regardless, it is a problem for you to address and address quickly. Doing too many yourself is not the way to fix it.
3. Ensure that you have sufficient resources – of the right kinds – to get the tasks done.

Of course you can’t delegate – or combat “reverse” delegation – if you don’t have enough of the right people to perform the “doing” tasks that you are not going to perform. To ensure that your supply of appropriate resources matches up with the demand for these resources, you’ll need a capacity planning model. The idea is that supply and demand has to be at least roughly in alignment if you are going to get the work done. Otherwise, you won’t be able to hand off the less important tasks to others and will be forced to absorb the work that others can’t or won’t do. But, aligning supply and demand isn’t merely a matter of quantity. You need sufficient people with the right skills and training to do the jobs you will be assigning them, including the tasks you’ve performed in the past but cannot afford to continue performing. To accomplish this requires that you hire the best and continuously develop the rest.

To do this, first find the very best people. Don’t simply select from the pool of people available if the “best” in the existing pool doesn’t reach the minimum qualifications bar you’ve set. Hunting for talent to ensure you find the best person for the position, rather than being satisfied with just those who respond to the “ads,” will pay big dividends in the end. But, whether you hire from the inside or outside, and regardless of whether you assign new tasks to present employees or those coming on board, developing your employees is essential. Today’s new employees soon become tomorrow’s veterans, so it is critical to provide current staff with “stretch assignments” – opportunities to become exposed to new areas and to learn additional skills – so that they will be prepared for tomorrow’s assignments.

4. Become more efficient in how you use your time.
Regardless of how effective you are at delegating or how well you have ensured that your organization has sufficient and appropriate resources to meet the demands on these resources, if you don’t manage your own time wisely, you will still find yourself doing far more than you should – and not leading enough.

Bookshelves sag under the weight of books written about time-management, and each book’s lessons may or may not apply to your particular situation. Still, there are a number of basic principles you should consider:

• **Be decisive:** Become a deliberate but decisive decision maker – don’t let important choices linger too long. Gather the data, outline the options, and move the process along so momentum is maintained.

• **Engage in “defensive calendaring:”** Is your calendar running you or are you managing your calendar? You now know what your priorities are, but have you built into your schedule the actions you need to take to move these important responsibilities forward? For example, have you made time on your calendar to consult with others whose input is important if you are to accomplish your priorities? Have you saved blocks of time during the day to work on them? “Defensive calendaring” works best if you look far enough ahead to reserve time slots large enough for you to focus on the work you need to accomplish. If you don’t reserve this time, you may find it all but impossible to get the work done during your normal workday. Some of these future slots should be assigned to those “Important but Not Immediate” tasks on your list. That way, time will be available when they become “Important and Immediate.”

One more point about “defensive calendaring:” build into your calendar regular meetings – with yourself. One-on-one. Door closed. No phone calls. Then it is just you and your thoughts and your ideas. Thinking. Planning. Reflecting. Perhaps it’s just an hour each day, or perhaps it’s a block of time one day a week. Whenever it is, it should be regular, inviolate (no interruptions except when a staff member has a heart attack or the building’s on fire), and structured.

• **Avoid multi-tasking:** OK, so it’s “the thing to do” to brag about how often and how well you multi-task. The dirty little secret about multi-tasking, however, is that it hinders your productivity by preventing you from focusing exclusively on what you’re doing. Our minds aren’t supple or quick enough to process informa-
tion coming from various sorts simultaneously. So when you’re on the phone, listen—don’t answer your e-mail at the same time. If you’re in a meeting, participate—no instant messaging to the person across the table or text messaging on your cell phone.

A related multi-tasking problem is when you’re only doing one task at a time but you don’t stay with it long enough to finish it. So you move from A to B to C to maybe F or G without finishing any of the tasks. Then when you eventually get back to A, you can’t remember what it’s all about and what you’ve already done to advance the task or project. Obviously, you’ll waste a lot of time working to get back on track. So, the best bet is to separate your workday into blocks of time devoted to specific projects—blocks of hours instead of minutes.

• **Organize and reduce, if possible, the time you spend reading and writing e-mail:** Admittedly, e-mail is both a blessing and a bane. Unlike the phone, which rings whenever the other person wants to interrupt us, we have some control over when we read, respond to, and initiate e-mail messages. The problem, however, is that too few people exercise this control. In fact, we interrupt ourselves by turning to our computer screen compulsively to check our e-mail. After all, somebody important wants our advice or opinion. Or maybe it’s somebody unimportant who has e-mailed the one person in the world who has the skills, the intelligence, and the composure to resolve his or her problem. Now admittedly, you’re unlikely to be able to totally ignore every e-mail message at the time it propels its way onto your computer screen every day. Depending upon your responsibilities and the nature of your organization, you may have to check your e-mail the moment you walk through the door each morning. Still, there is a lot you can do to control your e-mail addiction. The trick is to manage your e-mail instead of having your e-mail manage you.

• **Reduce the amount of time you spend in meetings by running more efficient meetings or, if a participant, taking steps to ensure that the time is used wisely:** We all know that meetings can be a waste of time, but we also know that many of them are absolutely necessary. In fact, we complain when meetings are not called (“communications around here are lousy, nobody tells me a thing”) and, when efforts are made to improve communications by bringing people together in face-to-face encounters, we complain too.

The reason is simple: many meetings are poorly run. You know the kind—ideas ricochet off one another as if the meeting is taking place in a squash court. Any relationship between point A and point B is purely coincidental. The “chair” could just as well be the real thing given the lack of direction he or she provides. At the end, some great ideas have been put forth—about something—and the participants push back their chairs and scamper out of the room without having any idea of what was agreed to or accomplished.
So whether you are the “chair” or just a participant, you can take steps to ensure that meetings you attend run smoothly and that at the end, there is a wrap-up: conclusions reached, tasks assigned (if appropriate), future steps decided. If you are the “chair,” run the meeting. This does not mean overpowering the other participants or talking them into submission. It means facilitating the discussion, whether by following a pre-announced outline or by gently guiding the discussion to ensure that all issues are addressed and that conclusions are reached and summarized before moving to the next point. And, if you are only a participant, you can do the same if the “chair” is not taking responsibility for running the meeting. Although to “chair” from a participant’s seat requires some finesse since you do not want to appear to be taking over from the nominal “chair.” It can be done. And often is.

Whether “chair” or participant, remember that effective meetings have a “diamond” shape to them:

First, there is divergence – participants offer a variety of ideas and suggestions all (ideally) related to the topic at hand (and here’s where the “chair” or the de facto chair comes in – trying to keep everybody under the same tent).

Then, there’s the narrowing process – where a hundred ideas become maybe a dozen or half-a-dozen. For this, individuals or sub-groups will need time to think and/or reflect, and eventually winnow.

Finally, there is closure – where the “chair” or de facto chair first facilitates group work to reduce the results of the narrowing process to a decision, next steps and a list of who’s responsible for each step and when the work is due, then summarizing the
result. She or he should ask for agreement: “I believe we have decided that...Am I correct? Does anyone want to modify or amend the consensus I believe we have agreed to?” A simple worksheet can bring clarity and focus to such a meeting as you get the group to review the following: what, who, when.

Ensuring that your organization is positioned to meet future challenges is a big job – and it’s one you can’t do if you are stumbling under the weight of a multitude of tasks; most of them not requiring the talents and experience you possess. Since a major part of your job should be to give strategic direction to your organization that is, leading the organization – you have to figure out how to spend less time doing so you will have the time to lead. The purpose of this note has been to suggest ways to accomplish this goal, having time to lead. But remember, you have to change your practices. Admittedly, a key reason why you spend so much of your time doing is because others intrude upon your time – barging into your office at a moment’s notice about the most trivial matters, bombarding you with unnecessary e-mails or calls just to “check in,” holding lengthy and poorly run meetings that you have to attend. Still, in the end, it’s your responsibility to gain control over your workday so you can help your organization meet tomorrow’s challenges.

**Suggestions:**

- Be intentional: balance time spent on Leading - Managing - Doing
- Set priorities to clarify the focus
- Develop practices to enable you to put time in on the important
- Delegate - Delegate - Delegate
- Use defensive calendaring
- Build the capacity you need
- Contain e-mail
- Make meetings more proactive