



Assistant Principal *Ex*celeration

Coping with Urgent

It is testing time. Students are restless and teachers are tired, so discipline issues are beginning to increase. Maybe it is also IEP season. Still doing contact tracing? Watching tapes of inappropriate bus behavior?

It is difficult to be strategic and focus on growing teachers with so many competing demands. One of the additional hazards of having so much to do is that you become reactive to whatever is in front of you. Your life is urgent and everything that comes across your desk (or your walkie-talkie) feels urgent.

One key to moving from urgent leadership to strategic leadership is acting with intention. When approached with a new urgent task, strategic leaders step back and check whether that new task is urgent **and** important, or just urgent.

We like to think of strategic leadership as being proactive, but the truth is that in your busy jobs, you also need to learn to become **strategically reactive**.

When forced to react to a situation, you have five options for action. The actions are arranged hierarchically. Think of them as a sorting method. Try to apply the first action. If you can't, move to the second option and so on.

1. **Give it up.** Ask yourself whether this is a necessary task. You may be surprised how many tasks are not important (quadrant 3). If it is not important, let it go. Items in this category include lots of email, especially the FYI types, some meetings, and paperwork. This is also an effective strategy for dealing with requests that appear mundane or capricious.
2. **Give it back.** Some issues are important to others but not to you or the organization. These shouldn't be ignored as they can impact the invested party's motivation. Think of these issues as monkeys. When someone tries to give you their monkey, give it back to them! You don't need to care for other people's monkeys. You can give monkeys back by:
 - a. Acknowledging the concern and emotions of the monkey owner
 - b. Rephrasing the concern as you understand it
 - c. Providing them with a task as a next step. This task could include:
 - i. Further reflection on the root problem
 - ii. Developing a list of options
 - iii. Talking with others
 - iv. Doing some research



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v. Scheduling a future meeting

These steps help assure the person that you have heard them and validated their concern, but they also put the onus on the person to solve their own problem.

Some people will never bring that monkey back to you again. That's good, because if they aren't willing to work for their own monkey, why should you? Others may invest some energy in the task you asked them to do and come back. That's a sign that they are invested in taking care of their own monkey and you can respond appropriately.

3. **Give it away.** Ideally, you should spend most of their time doing what only you can do. That may mean doing what only you have the skill for, but it can also mean doing only what you have the *unique* responsibility to do. *If the task isn't dependent on your unique talent or position, can you give it (delegate) to someone else?*

This is important as leaders often hang onto or own issues that could be given to others. There are a couple of barriers to giving the issue away that you should be mindful of. Each of these barriers can be dealt with proactively (see below) with some planning and investment. Other people could do the task except:

- a. They won't do it the way you would do it
- b. They are capable but don't yet have the skills or capacity
- c. The task is complex and others don't know the process

Developing strong standard operating processes (SOPs) can help others to do things that you don't have to do, and to do them consistently and well.

The other thing to be aware of is that we often don't let go of things that we enjoy doing even if we shouldn't be doing them. I knew an assistant principal who spent two hours a month doing the bulletin board opposite the main office door. She loved doing the bulletin board and she did a great job. But this AP was too busy to follow-up on her observations of teachers. That was two hours a month, 30 minutes every week, that she selfishly indulged in something she liked to do at the expense of growing teachers.

4. **Give it a C.** If you must be the one to do the task, give it your minimal effort and be done with it. Obviously, this doesn't apply to anything that is mission critical, but do you really need to spend three hours preparing a weekly update? This is very difficult for many people, but remember the three epiphanies:
 - a. I can't do everything
 - b. I choose what doesn't get done
 - c. My choices reflect my values



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This means that when you choose to spend extra time making sure something is just right, you are valuing the appearance of your professionalism over investing that time into helping a teacher improve their craft. I'm sorry if that sounds harsh, and you may disagree with me, but be aware next time you are investing precious time into making sure the email is just right or the document formatting is perfect. Yes, you must get the schedule changes out to teachers, but does the table really need to be pretty? Does clip art improve the information? Are the extra paragraphs you have included to justify your thinking necessary?

In the extra minutes you spent being perfect, you could have done a five-minute coaching session. Which one would have a bigger impact on your school?

And there is this: by definition, a C is good enough.

5. **Give it a bounce.** If it is complex and requires your attention, take the minimal action that will allow you to bounce it to someone else for the next step. This gets it off your plate so you don't need to worry about it. If it comes back to you later, that's fine. Dealing with small tasks is easier than dealing with big ones and a minimal response may be better than a detailed but delayed response.

The Minimally Viable Approach

I want to focus more on the last two items because they are closely related. How might your job be different if instead of trying to be great, you took an MVP approach to everything? This may sound insane but think about it for a minute.

- Is an MVP newsletter any less valuable than a fancy one?
- Is an email that says "yes" in response to a question any less valuable than one that includes three paragraphs about why the answer is yes? Does anyone even read those three paragraphs?
- Is an MVP report any less valuable than a flowery one?

There are all kinds of short-cuts we can – and should – take. Part of this is becoming more aware of the types of interactions we have with people. If a teacher comes to us with a concern over a scheduling change, we need to understand the purpose of the conversation:

- If they aren't happy and just want to vent, then we listen.
- If they have a question, then we answer the question.
- If they have an idea, then we listen and process the idea.

Too many times we don't stop to assess what the person needs from the conversation. We begin explaining, justifying, convincing. This is a problem because if we are doing all the talking



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then we aren't really listening. People are more concerned with the answer to the question than the rationale behind the answer. If they want the rationale, they will ask.

Over the course of the next week, take a few minutes to reflect at the end of each day:

1. Was there anything you did that was unnecessary?
2. Did you accept any monkeys?
3. Did you do things that other people could have done equally as well, or at least good enough?
4. Did you spend more time on something because you wanted it to be "just right"?
5. Did you fixate or delay on something because you wanted it to be better?

Remember, you have two jobs: Keep people safe and help teachers become better. Everything else is a distraction. They may be important, mandatory, or even essential, but they still distract from your core jobs. Put your core responsibilities first, then fill in the rest of your time. Be strategically reactive to help protect the time you invest into teacher development.