

JUGGLING MULTIPLE PRIORITIES: Time Management Strategies for Principals

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Few jobs are as complex and involve as many different responsibilities as the high 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.

We’ve talked with many principals about strategies they use to balance competing priorities. We then organized them into a three-step process to assess where you are and create structures that help manage multiple responsibilities.

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

The first step is to recognize the strengths and challenges of your current situation. One principal we talked with was so overwhelmed, she said, “I don’t think I can make a list. It will make it seem worse.” That’s not true. Clarifying where you are is an important step in beginning to change your situation.

We suggest you take a few minutes and assess your current situation.

Strengths	Challenges

As we continued to work with this principal, her list of strengths was longer than she thought. The list of challenges, while long, was not nearly as out of control as she thought.

Taking time to assess the current situation often proves to be a useful step in gaining “a dose of reality” about your situation.

The second part of this step is to create a vision of how you want to spend your 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? Now, 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.

Step 2: Make a Mental Adjustment

Many principals feel overwhelmed with the responsibilities of their role. Our thoughts drive our feelings and actions. We’ve found it helpful if we want to make a change, to start with an adjustment in how we think about what we are doing.

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
Many of our students can't meet the graduation requirements.	I'll make a positive impact on one or two students today.

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.

Step 3: Create Structures to Support Your Vision

The third step in our process is to create a set of regular, consistent structures that will support attainment of your vision. There is no one perfect strategy---except the one that works for you. However, we've found several strategies that have been effectively used by other principals.

Recently we read a book about managing e-mail that suggested not checking it before 10am. The author said that checking e-mail first thing each day allowed the e-mail to set the day's agenda. She suggested using the first two hours of each day to work on your most important priorities rather than responding to the most recent request.

We've also found the following 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.

Use a Journal – Several principals we know 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.

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

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.

Keep Your Focus – 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.

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.

Final Thoughts

Juggling priorities can be challenging. Many of the principals we’ve worked with have found that setting a vision, adjusting their perspective, and creating a set of structures to support their goals are steps that can help a principal take control of their work and manage time more effectively. We’d like to hear from you about the strategies you find most useful in managing your priorities and your use of time.

Additional Information On This Topic is Available From . . .
“Principals Offer Practical, Timely ‘Time Management’ Tips, http://www.education-world.com/a_admin/admin/admin436_a/shtml

Michigan Principals Fellowship and Coaches Institute Time Management Tips including a list of Time Management Challenges and responses, http://www.aypsupport.org/December_Newsletter2007.pdf

Get Organized! Time Management for School Leaders, by Frank Buck (Eye on Education, 2008)

Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity, by David Allen (Viking, 2001)

Never Check E-Mail in the Morning and Other Unexpected Strategies for Making Your Work Life Work, by Julie Morgenstern (Fireside Publishing, 2005)

This Feature Article is adapted from "Juggling Priorities," a chapter in *The Principals from A to Z* (2009, Eye on Education).

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