



MAKE THE MOST

By William Powell and Ochan Kusuma-Powell

High-quality schools are very busy organizations, and whenever there is a new development in the field of education that requires teacher attention (peer coaching, personalized learning, metacognition, brain research, cooperative learning, etc.), many teachers ask: “But where will the time come from?”

In our years of facilitating professional learning to schools around the world, we have heard this question hundreds of times. At first, we assumed that it might be a way for teachers to mask resistance to a new idea or initiative. But we have heard it so many times from hard-working and dedicated teachers that we have come to realize that teachers meant exactly what they were saying: *Where will the time come from?*

HOW WE TALK ABOUT TIME

Time is a slippery topic. Linguistically, we treat time as a substance — something tangible that can be measured, rationed, bought and sold, budgeted, saved, or even

wasted. The problem with this is that it gives the appearance that we have some control over time. We don't.

We tend to confuse duration (the passage of time) with the tasks we engage in. Time is not a substance, nor does it act like one — especially in organizations committed to learning.

Bemoaning a lack of time in a very busy school is rather like gorging on fast food and then blaming gravity for the weight gain.

For most of the 20th century, schools were thought to be learning factories, and our concept of time came from an assembly line mindset. Students were products, and the subject-area content was our raw material.

Like factories, we used bells and whistles to divide the daily schedule. Punctuality and efficiency came to be perceived as moral issues. When a student learned in what we thought to be an inefficient manner or was regularly late to class, we questioned his or her character and upbringing. The emphasis was on student and teacher compliance and conformity.

To a large extent, we are still under the influence of Frederick Winslow Taylor's time and motion studies (1911) and his obsession with measurable productivity.



OF EVERY DAY

EXAMINE YOUR
PRACTICE TO SIFT
OUT TIME WASTERS

ACTIVITY OVERLOAD

Conscientious schools are often very busy places. Teachers frequently work 10- to 12-hour days and can be found at 5 or 6 o'clock in the evening leading a musical rehearsal, coaching a sports team, preparing unit plans, or developing new assessment material.

Unfortunately, busy-ness doesn't always equate with high-quality learning. In fact, once a school becomes too busy, that overload of activity often serves as a barrier to deep learning — for both students and adults. Some well-meaning schools suffer from organizational attention deficit disorder (Goleman, 2013).

We have a friend who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). She will ask questions but provide no time for anyone to reply. She constantly interrupts others and flits from one activity to another. She will start a sentence on one subject and change the topic midstream. At times, she can be a difficult person to interact with.

Several years ago, she discovered that her grandson might also have ADHD, and she was concerned that there might be a genetic connection. One evening, she asked us: "How severe ... how serious is ADHD?" And she actually paused for a response. We told her that ADHD is serious as it inhibits a person from pursuing his or her goals.

We would say the same for schools. Some schools claim to be on the cutting edge because they embrace every new initiative that comes along. Each year, a new series of goals and objectives arrives with a new and puzzling nomenclature. These schools are so busy that the truly important is often squeezed out and replaced by the merely urgent.

In these schools, teacher stress levels are often very high — not only because there are so many initiatives underway, but also because there doesn't appear to be any connection or link between the initiatives. There is no coherence, and therefore the goals appear fragmented and arbitrary.

ATTENTION AND INTENTION

It is a truism to say that intelligence and happiness depend almost exclusively on what we choose to pay attention to. However, this is much easier said than done. Our individual and collective attention is often drawn in many different directions. The media spend billions of dollars each year simply to garner our attention. Paying attention to what is truly important is becoming more and more difficult — including how we use our professional time.

Covey (1989) has suggested that one of the fundamental keys to time and task management is to classify and prioritize

TIME AND TASK MANAGEMENT MATRIX

Individually or with your team, enter examples from your daily professional life that fit within the four quadrants. Once you have done so, explore the quadrants looking for patterns. What insights are emerging?

| | URGENT | NOT URGENT |
|---------------|---|---|
| IMPORTANT | <p><u>QUADRANT 1</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crises • Deadline-driven projects • Pressing issues and problems • Health and safety issues <p>Examples:</p> <p>1. _____</p> <p>2. _____</p> <p>3. _____</p> <p>4. _____</p> | <p><u>QUADRANT 2</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal professional learning • Structured reflection • Peer coaching • Preventive activities • Relationship building • Recognizing new opportunities • Planning • Professional inquiry • Recreation <p>Examples:</p> <p>1. _____</p> <p>2. _____</p> <p>3. _____</p> <p>4. _____</p> |
| NOT IMPORTANT | <p><u>QUADRANT 3</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interruptions • Some phone calls, emails, social networking • Some meetings • Popular activities • Proximate, pressing activities <p>Examples:</p> <p>1. _____</p> <p>2. _____</p> <p>3. _____</p> <p>4. _____</p> | <p><u>QUADRANT 4</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trivia • Some mail • Some calls, email • Time wasters <p>Examples:</p> <p>1. _____</p> <p>2. _____</p> <p>3. _____</p> <p>4. _____</p> |

Adapted from Covey, 1989.

our responsibilities in terms of their importance and urgency. He has proposed a matrix similar to the one above.

Quadrant 1 is the domain of tasks that are both urgent and important. Inevitably, we can expect to spend some of our professional time in quadrant 1. From time to time, urgent crises will come upon us without warning. However, when we dwell too much in quadrant 1, we become crisis managers, rushing to put out fires. We are reactive as opposed to proactive.

Quadrant 1 can be seductive. The longer one dwells in it, the more it comes to consume one’s life. The long-term effects of living in quadrant 1 are unhealthy stress and burnout.

Quadrants 3 and 4 are the domains of those who live irresponsible lives. The tasks in these arenas are simply not important, and, in quadrant 3, the urgency is coming from someone else — not from our own deeply held values and beliefs.

Covey suggests that quadrant 2, the domain of the important but not urgent, is the place to be. It is in quadrant 2 that we engage in structured reflection, build trusting relationships,

envision the future, design short- and long-term plans, and take preventive maintenance measures that preempt crises from occurring in the first place. Quadrant 2 is where our actions are deeply aligned and congruent with our values. It is the home of responsibility and integrity.

It sounds simple, but staying in quadrant 2 requires considerable self-discipline. In order to say yes to quadrant 2, we must be prepared to say no to other activities. Jim Collins (2001) counsels leaders not to prepare a daily to-do list, but rather to prepare a daily list of things NOT to do. In order to pay attention to the important, we must ruthlessly re-examine the distractions in our professional and personal lives. Our modern, digitized world makes this increasingly difficult, but no less crucial.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN EXPERIMENT

Time pressure, the sense of urgency we feel when confronting a deadline or time-sensitive task, has been shown to have

a strong influence on our behavior and decision making. How we perceive time can actually influence our ethical behavior and moral compass.

The classic research in this field is commonly referred to as the Good Samaritan Experiment. Researchers Darley and Batson (1973) investigated how individual Princeton seminary students might behave in preparation for giving a brief sermon on the biblical story of the Good Samaritan. The seminarians were told that the sermon was to be presented at a building across campus and that their presentation would be critically evaluated by their supervisors. So the stakes were reasonably high.

As each individual completed his preparation, he was told either that he was late and must hurry to the prescribed sermon venue or that he had plenty of time but he might as well head over now. The only difference in the two groups was the manipulation of their sense of urgency.

As the seminarians walked across the campus, each encountered a person (a research confederate) slumped over in an alley in obvious great physical distress. The seminarians were faced with the decision of whether to assist the stranger — as the biblical Good Samaritan had done — or hurry to their presentation. The question that interested the researchers was whether time pressure would influence the students' behavior. Specifically, would *doing* the right thing take precedence over giving a sermon *about* the right thing?

The seminarians' sense of urgency had a profound effect on their behavior. The vast majority of those who believed they had plenty of time stopped to assist the stranger in distress. However, more than 90% of the students who believed they were late for their presentation failed to render assistance. Darley and Batson's seminal research demonstrates that time perspectives change people's behavior (Zimbardo & Boyd, 2008) so that they may act in ways that are actually counter to their deeply held beliefs and values.

For this reason, we need to be doubly cautious about activities that dwell in quadrants 1 and 3. Urgency can blind us to real ethical and moral concerns.

3 WAYS THAT SCHOOLS SQUANDER TIME

When teachers ask where to find time for differentiation or peer coaching or other professional learning, there is a recognition that we are busy people and perhaps an unspoken assumption that we are already using our time wisely. This may or may not be the case. Let's examine three common ways in which schools and school people squander time.

1. Generating feedback that isn't used.

One of the greatest wastes of time for teachers is generating feedback on student work that students then ignore or reject. One English teacher recalls that, as a young teacher, he would spend hours and hours over the weekends marking student essays. He was very conscientious about identifying students' er-

rors and providing suggestions for how they might improve. He was much less conscientious about making sure that students actually used his feedback to make revisions. Teacher feedback that isn't used by students squanders billions of hours of teacher time each year.

2. Meetings that don't use protocols or facilitators.

We have all heard the low groan of teachers when someone proposes yet another meeting. How did meetings get such a bad name? Many of the meetings we attend are enormous wastes of time. Some should never be held in the first place, and others should take half the time that they actually do. There are two separate and important issues here.

The first is to determine whether the topic or issue really requires collective thought and inquiry. David Perkins calls this the lawn mower paradox (2003) in that it is much easier for seven men to mow a lawn than it is for seven men to design a more efficient lawn mower.

There are some tasks that do not lend themselves easily to collaboration. For example, if something needs to be written, it is often much more efficient to have someone write a draft and then have the group edit it. Writing by committee can be frustrating and time-consuming. We need to carefully consider whether a task actually requires collaborative effort.

Second, meetings need to use protocols that focus the group's attention and provide structure to the conversation. Meetings that don't use protocols and are not well-facilitated often stray off task and the conversation meanders, much to participants' irritation.

There is a common misunderstanding that using protocols in meetings may inhibit equitable contributions from all members — somehow using an explicit meeting structure impairs democracy, and it is more important to hear everyone's voice than it is to be productive.

Efficiency and affiliation do not need to be diametrically opposed. They can actually serve to complement each other. The key here is skillful facilitation. In our experience, unstructured meetings often result in members taking attentional leave — deserting a frustrating meeting mentally, if not physically.

3. The failed system of teacher evaluation.

Conduct an experiment in your school. Ask a large group of teachers how many of them have experienced significant professional learning and growth as a result of the traditional process of teacher evaluation.

We have done so in many, many schools. The positive response is minuscule. Most teachers (and many administrators) have come to perceive the annual process of teacher evaluation as an enormous waste of time — something mindlessly forced upon the evaluator and the evaluated.

If the purpose of traditional teacher evaluation is to develop

Continued on p. 46

with an oppositional participant. He plays Solitaire openly on his iPad. I am crushed. This workshop is such important work. How can he not see this? I spend two weeks carrying around an insecurity that what I have put into the world is not worthy of another's consideration. I talk with my therapist. I meditate. Ugh. I feel dismissed.

Bright spot: Later in the year, again concerned my work wasn't a right fit with the culture of the group in which I was presenting, I find myself pouting in my hotel room. I get into an elevator with a big wheel in the profession. I am intimidated. We get off the elevator, and a woman comes up to ME to tell me what a great job I did in my session. She asks the big wheel if he will take a picture of us. Not accustomed to that role, he pauses as she hands him her camera. I grin widely. My life is forever altered.

Blot/bright spot: I present in Canada. It is a respectful group. Quiet. Too quiet. I worry the work doesn't resonate. I am driven home by a colleague who says the Twitterverse was on fire with tweets during the day. She also received texts as to

how good the day was going. I am delighted and surprised and puzzled all at once. I question what engagement looks like and begin to trust the work even more. I feel validated.

Bright spot: I spend a Saturday night reflecting on my career path. I am happy to spend a Saturday night doing so. I think of Paulo Coelho: "If you think adventure is dangerous, try routine. It's lethal." I celebrate, solo, in one of those hotel rooms I have mentioned above. Ah, what a squiggled blob of a successful career I have.

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Make the most of every day

Continued from p. 43

professional learning that results in enhanced performance in the classroom, it has been a miserable failure. Not only has it not produced meaningful professional learning and not enhanced student learning, it has served to create dependency relationships and has infantilized teachers.

It has also done much to undermine the vital culture of relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2004) that must form the fabric of culture in high-quality schools. We desperately need a new perspective on teacher supervision. We would argue that, in order for teachers to become self-directed adult learners, they must engage in accurate and healthy self-assessment. Research from schools and the corporate sector strongly suggests that external evaluative feedback actually *inhibits* accurate self-assessment (Sanford, 1995).

EXAMINE OUR PRACTICES

It's not the quantity of time at our disposal that is at issue. It is how wisely we use what is available. As a profession, we urgently need to examine our current practices critically and ruthlessly to determine which may be inefficient, which may waste time, and which may actually be counterproductive.

This will not be popular, and the irony is that some may perceive such an examination as a waste of time. However, as Bob Garmston and Bruce Wellman (2008) have written, "Any group that is too busy to reflect on how it is working together is a group that is too busy to improve."

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