

DOING LEADER WORK

By Michael Couch and Richard Citrin

One of the most frequent concerns we hear from leaders is that they do not have enough time to do the vital work to deliver the most significant value to their organization. They get stuck doing management work instead of leadership work.

Management work includes overseeing schedules, reviewing documents, preparing reports, and providing guidance and direction to team members. Additionally, of course, the people management ranges from supporting and celebrating success among team members to dealing with employees who are underperformers or even worse. Then, each leader's assigned work must also get done. Management work is essential and will always be a requirement for everyone. Work needs to get done.

When we talk about leadership work, most people think of crafting a business strategy or looking at complex data analytics to formulate a new approach to a workstream. Some leaders want to research current and future leading-edge ideas, bring together groups of top thinkers in the business, and create a book or article about the state of the industry.

While having time to accomplish the leadership work most leaders aspire to achieve, the realities of today's fast-paced, ever-changing workplace can make that difficult. How can leaders find the time to do what we like to refer to as deep work?

Bouncing between your email box, redundant meetings and HR policy reviews are indicators of busyness but not productivity. The notion of tracking activities rather than outcomes is why so many of us find work unrewarding. Instead, we want to focus on the work that brings us joy and meaning. In the current issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, Marcus Buckingham suggests that we craft our work so that we are doing things that we love to do and not

just what we have to do.

Doing meaningful work is essential in finding fulfillment, satisfaction and engagement in our jobs. Research from a Mayo Clinic study examined physician burnout and reported that if doctors could engage 20% of their time on work that was meaningful to them, they could avoid burnout and be more engaged. Not every physician knew what that was for them until someone talked with them about their strengths and joys in the workplace and how they could find that pot of gold. Once the discussion ensued, it became easier to see whether it was direct patient care, research activities, administrative leadership or mentoring younger physicians. An exciting factor gleaned from the study was that there was no significant engagement gain even if the doctors spent much more than 20% of their time on meaningful work. The key was to find what was most rewarding and brought a sense of meaning to their day.

This study implies that it is not essential for a strategic leader to spend more than a quarter of their time on strategic and oversized picture items. We may have to do the more mundane tasks in our work life to genuinely appreciate and maximize the opportunity to do the more profound work that many leaders aspire to achieve. While it is often thought that strategic position should consume all the time of leaders, this study suggests that the other mundane management work is essential and may provide the perspective to appreciate and succeed with their leadership work.

How do we, therefore, go about finding that balance? Here are some ideas to consider.

State your objective and plan to someone else: There is great power in making a verbal commitment to setting a goal yourself. That statement of responsibility helps you focus

and creates allies who will support your efforts. It may be to your manager, peers or even a spouse. Anyone who will not help you forget is a good candidate.

Examine your habits: Changing routines that create new patterns can help shape new ways of thinking and, perhaps more importantly, greater efficiencies. Instead of starting the day by checking email, see what happens if you take one day a week to check email after spending the first 90 minutes of the day on a strategic issue. In today's hybrid world, it may be that the quiet afforded in the last morning is an excellent time to dig deeper into a report that holds some secret that others have missed. Research shows that it takes two to three months to change habits. That is a long time to commit to change, but it helps to bring about a lasting change.

Honor your emotions: We all have a lot of feelings about how the workplace is changing and where our place in it fits. One colleague of ours, Alan Weiss, has trademarked the term "No Normal" to suggest that we aren't going back to the old ways of doing things and there is no longer a "new normal." Our world will be upside down for the foreseeable future, and we should get ready for it. All of this creates a great deal of tension and anxiety, and while we want to recognize that our emotions are honest, we don't want to let them get too far ahead of us. Remember that difficulties are inevitable, but suffering is optional.

Enormous opportunities are happening right before our eyes in our evolving workplace. Finding meaning and joy in our roles as leaders is essential in setting the culture and expectations for employees. Modeling how to find happiness and even bring love to our work may be the next frontier of leadership and will be one that will come with a strategic payoff for our businesses.

Michael Couch and Richard Citrin are the co-authors of *Strategy-Driven Leadership: The Playbook for Developing Your Next Generation of Leaders*. Available now on Amazon.com