

How to manage your time

Most people wish for more time, but what would you fill it with? If your answer is more of the same — more Min of Ed implementations, more interruptions for requests from others, more checking email— then that's like saying the solution to your cluttered garage is a second garage to fill up.

Instead, you need a system that lets you organize and use your time more effectively so you can, as one principal described to us, “maintain progress on our daily learning goals while balancing the fires that occur on a daily basis.” It is possible — even for the busiest of school administrators.



1. Develop questions to help you determine the importance and urgency of tasks.

As a principal or vice principal (P/VP), you face hundreds of possible ways to use your time every week. How you judge those options is critical. The more you struggle to distinguish one task from another, the more likely you are to fall into the common traps of trying to do it all and failing to do much of anything well, or simply reacting to whatever tasks come your way rather than proactively setting your own agenda.

Instead, here are a few questions worth considering to help you judge a task's importance (impact on results) and urgency (when it truly needs to be done):

- How much will doing this help me, my team, or my school meet an important goal?
- If I do this now, how big will the payoff be in a week, a month, or a year?
- How long could it wait before it needs my attention — a week, a month, a year, forever?
- Am I the best or only person to do this?
- How much am I drawn to this because it feels comfortable or easy for me?

In running through these kinds of questions, you may determine that it's well worth dropping everything to share a critical update with your admin. team, since the new information impacts their work, or it may help a lead teachers with their departments work. Or you may decide to do that favour for a colleague now, since next month your admin. team is going to need time from their admin. team to complete a necessary piece of a project, grade 7 articulation.

On the other hand, maybe you come to realize that you're flooding your week with "quick win" tasks that really won't win you much of anything in the long run. Or that you're favoring an individual project over management responsibilities because it leverages skills you are good at.

2. Use the Time Matrix to focus the bulk of your time on important work.

FranklinCovey's Time Matrix (pictured) can help you visualize how you're spending your time — and open your eyes to how you'll need to change if you want to get more important work done.

So, how does your current workload rank on the axes of "important" and "urgent"? As you map common tasks onto the Time Matrix quadrants, consider:

What in Quadrant 2 should you invest more time in? It is easy to focus on Q1 and put off tasks in Q2, but investing more time in Q2 will make you more effective and help you achieve the results you want.

What problems in Quadrant 1 might you have been able to avoid with better planning or communication (i.e., more time spent up front in Quadrant 2)? Let's say a teacher shows you a draft of a report card due, and it's way off base. You'll spend an extraordinary amount of time explaining why their assessment practices are out of date. But what if you had set clearer expectations at the outset and had given regular feedback on acceptable assessment practices it may have saved you this time.

What could you reduce or eliminate from Quadrants 3 and 4? This may mean saying no to certain kinds of requests, batching small tasks to reduce interruptions, or working on breaking time-wasting habits. If you've relegated required but often maligned tasks like weekly meetings or classroom observations to these quadrants, how could you change them so they move squarely into Q2 and reach their potential?

Some tasks don't fit tidily into the quadrants, and sometimes it's hard to tell ahead of time where they belong (e.g., you may assume a meeting is important and discover halfway through that you didn't need to be there). Still, keeping the Time Matrix in mind can help you make better decisions about where to spend your time.

3. Make your school's well-being and development one of your top priorities.



For P/VPs, being productive is more than just getting things done yourself. A huge part is helping your school staff learn, grow, and reach their potential — the things that will let them do quality work, expand their capabilities, keep them excited to come to school, and not leave them feeling like they're stuck on an exhausting treadmill of tasks that are not related to their students or their own learning.

Sure, there's some amount of grunt work that needs to get done. But be sure that you're not delegating with the sole focus of checking off tasks and meeting School District or Ministry due dates. Factor in people's interests and professional growth goals. Use [this guide](#) for help, and for more tips see [Planning how you'll reach a team goal](#).

Of course, you'll need to know what your staff's development goals are. Ask about them in your regular 1-on-1s, and if they don't have any, work with them to determine some. For more, see [How to be a better career conversationalist](#).

4. Don't neglect to prioritize yourself.

Too often, P/VP put their own well-being and development last on their to-do list. There are many reasons why. Some believe it's noble to put the needs of their school or school district before their own. Or maybe they don't want to seem like slackers, so they sacrifice blocking off time to go to lunch with a friend, or go to the gym, or to learn a new skill.

If you're constantly giving energy to your school without replenishing it, you'll end up depleted — and ineffective. Instead, [talk to your assistant superintendent about a learning goal in your next 1-on-1](#) and take this [self-assessment](#) to see how you're doing managing your prime sources of energy. For more, see [How to manage your energy to do your job well](#).

5. Regularly spend time reviewing and scheduling your three to five most important tasks (then fit in other tasks around those).

It may sound counterintuitive to spend more time planning and scheduling if you're already so busy you can't even get your most important work done. But [research](#) suggests that if the important stuff gets planned and scheduled, it's far more likely to get done. Try this process:

- **30 minutes once per week:** Identify the three to five most important things you can do in the coming week to be effective. Consider your goals, what could set up your admin team or teachers for success, and important personal activities like exercise. Schedule these priorities on your calendar for the coming week.
- **10 minutes each day:** Review your progress and adjust your calendar as needed. Even with your best intentions, you may get pulled away for emergencies not on your list, or maybe an important task takes you longer than anticipated. Here's your chance to recommit and book more time for what's important.

Once time for key tasks is booked, you can fill in the rest of your calendar with update meetings, one-off requests, responding to email, and other tasks. Or for tasks that are important and urgent but don't make your top-five list, you may decide to adjust your

investment in them by giving them “good enough” treatment and save your best effort for higher priorities.

6. Talk about your top priorities with others.

Several great things can happen when you share your priorities: better goal alignment with colleagues, more accountability for your most important work (you’ve said it out loud, so you better deliver), and others adopting a similar focus.

- **Your Admin Team:** Even if you know what’s important to your admin team, it’s worth checking often to be sure you’re in sync. Try to discuss your top priorities, so they stay informed. And whenever you get a new task, clarify where it should fit on your priority list so you stay on track and so everyone better understands everything you’re juggling. For example: *“I want to be sure I’m prioritizing correctly. When does this need to be done? I also have those two other important Min of Ed reports on my plate and may need to adjust deadlines if I do this first.”*
- **Your Department Heads (Lead Learners):** You don’t want to make a project a top priority for your Department Heads, only to discover that another department you’ll rely on for a critical piece has plans to focus elsewhere. When sharing your priorities, ask department heads about theirs, too — you may surface new ideas for goals after getting more big-picture context of priorities across tall school departments.
- **Your staff:** Make sure that everyone understands your admin team’s top priorities. Then, free up the teachers involved to focus on those things by planning properly (which will help you avoid crises), sparing them unimportant work, and encouraging them to question you and each other about tasks that could distract from what’s important: *When does this really need to be done? How will this help us make progress on our department goals? Is this really the best thing for us to focus on right now?*

7. Develop ways of saying no to requests that aren’t a good use of your time.

If you’re a helpful person by nature (many P/VPs are), you may find it hard to resist a colleague’s plea for help. After all, if you say yes, the person will be happy. You will have built goodwill. You’ll feel relevant and involved. But if you say yes too often, you’ll lose control of your own time and effectiveness.

There are plenty of ways to say no without coming across as a jerk. For example:

- **In a positive tone, thank the person for asking.** *“Thanks for asking, and it sounds like an important initiative”* signals respect and will soften the blow of the no to follow.
- **Explain the impact the request would have on you or your team.** *“We have a big assembly next Thursday, and this would cause yet another disruption for staff and students.”* Often, askers don’t realize the trade-offs that would be required to do what they’re asking.

- **Provide another solution if you can.** So you don't have time to fulfill the request, but do you have a connection who might? Or would it be a good task for another colleague, with some coaching from you? Your ideas may be just as valuable.
- **When you feel tempted to say yes, ask for time to think it through.** A simple "Could I get back to you this afternoon?" might save you from a hasty yes when you've been caught off guard.

For more, see [Are you afraid to say no at work?](#)

8. Experiment with productivity tactics to help you work more efficiently.

There's no best tactic that works for everyone. Try experimenting in an area where you feel the most pain.

Procrastination. Commit to doing just two minutes of a task you're putting off —research suggests just getting started is the hardest part. Still don't feel like it? Try structured procrastination, a technique to shift your energy to complete other important tasks.

Unnecessary/long meetings. Start with a meeting audit to eliminate unnecessary ones. Schedule blocks of working time on your calendar (see No. 5) to prevent others from booking every hour of your day. And make your meetings more efficient with good agendas and prework expectations for attendees.

Managing email. Spending too much time checking? Try picking one day this week to check email only three times. Spending too much time writing? Aim for shorter emails, summarizing the purpose in the subject line and structuring your main points in list form. For more ideas, see 7 tips to make email more efficient within your team.

Late/long hours. Work has a tendency to fill as much time as you give it. Try setting a specific end time to your workday, then plan your day backward from there. You may find you're able to be as productive in fewer hours. Or, if the issue is more that you feel pressure to be available at all hours, try setting a work/life boundary that you explain to your colleagues: "*Irina, to better pace myself, I don't respond to emails in the evenings anymore. If you send me something, I will respond in the morning.*" Research finds that people often fall into a trap of working more hours not because they want to or because it makes them more productive, but because they don't want to be seen as slackers by their peers and boss.

Too many interruptions. Set office hours for your team, or adjust your office door to reflect your availability. Door wide open = come on in. Door slightly open = working but would have "a minute." Door closed = in a meeting or Do Not Disturb unless it is an emergency.

Be sure to let your admin team know how you're experimenting, so they know your availability and can offer feedback on how your new ways impact their workflow.

9. Frequently assess your time management system.

Whenever your organization changes or you or your team completes a big project, your priorities — and what's important and what's urgent — almost certainly should change, too. Use the steps above to recalibrate what's important now and what's *not* important going forward. For more guidance, see [How to evaluate and improve your team's goal performance](#) and [How to guide your team through change](#).

If you would like to bring a FranklinCovey Time Management workshop, or any other workshop to your school district or local PVPA please contact the BCPVPA - peter@bcpvpa.bc.ca

© 2022 FranklinCovey, All Rights Reserved - Edited and used by the BCPVPA with permission.