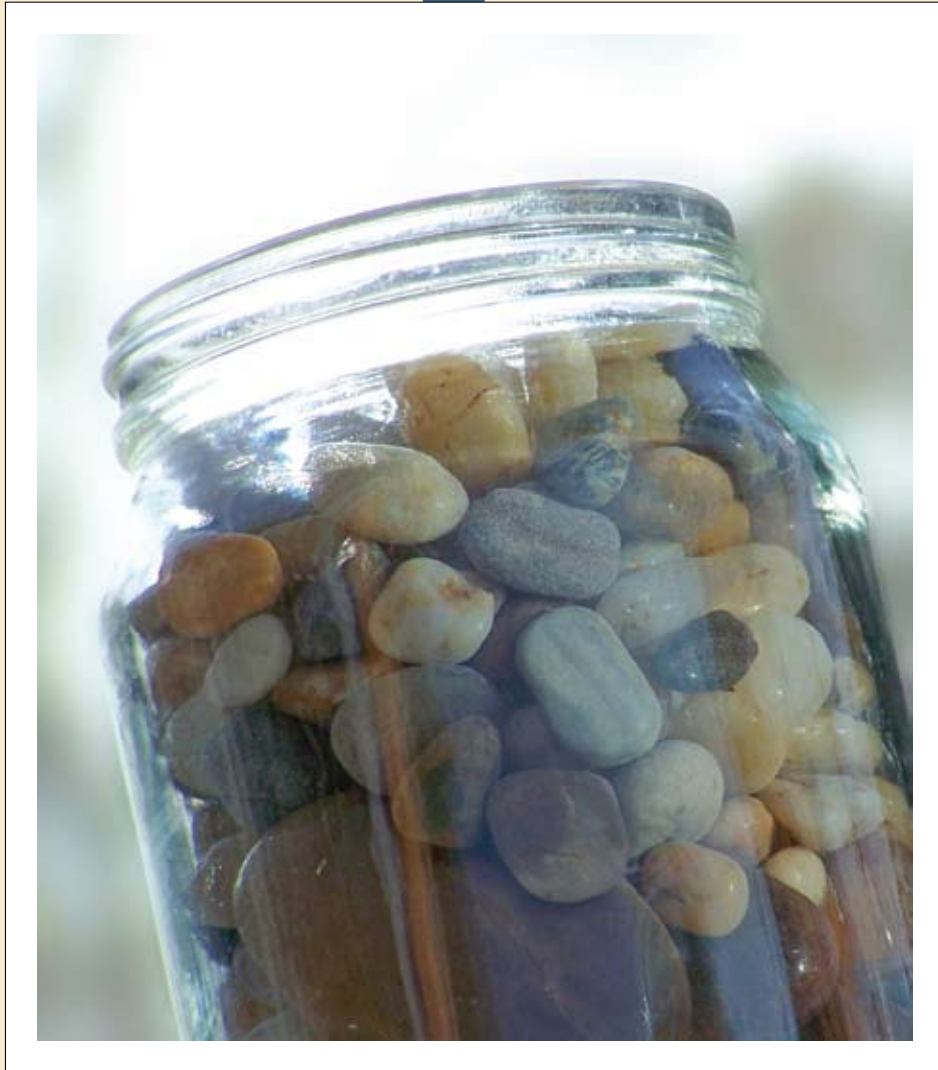


# The Big Rocks



## Priority Management for Principals

By Kim Marshall

Principals can easily find their time eaten up by things that are urgent, but not important. Here are some strategies for focusing on what truly makes a difference in school leadership.

**H**ow can a dedicated principal work really, really hard but fail to get significant gains in student achievement? The answer is obvious: by spending too much time on the wrong things and not enough on the right things. That sounds pretty straightforward—but in my 15 years as a Boston principal, I wasn't clear enough about the "right things" and often fell victim to H.S.P.S. (Hyperactive Superficial Principal Syndrome). As a result, students didn't do nearly as well as they could have. Since leaving the principalship, I've pondered my mistakes, learned from the masters of time management, and now offer the following advice to the principals I coach.

### **Identify the Big Rocks**

The principal's number-one priority is zeroing in on the highest-priority activities for bringing all students to high levels of achievement. If you don't put the two or three top priorities into your calendar first, all the other stuff will clutter your days. Covey (1989) said it best: "The key is not to prioritize what's on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities" (p. 161).

For the principal, the big rocks are the actions that drive high achievement for all students. Without a clear sense of these research-based activities, a school leader will accomplish very little. Robert Marzano, Mike Schmoker, Douglas Reeves, Richard DuFour, Ronald Ferguson, and others have given principals a much clearer idea of what those activities are. The challenge is figuring out which two or three are the highest priority in your school, setting measurable goals, and pursuing them with laserlike determination. Once you've put your lean, mean strategic plan in place, it's much easier to say no to off-mission activities, to be present for students and staff members, and to roll with the punches (because there will still be those crazy days).

# 10 Big Rocks for Principals



## Set Clear Expectations

Every staff member must know the school's discipline procedures and grade-by-grade student learning outcomes. This sounds obvious, but I'm amazed at how many teachers in schools I visit don't have a booklet on the desk that clearly states what students should know and be able to do by the end of the year and a list on the bulletin board of the discipline infractions that require a referral to the office (and, by implication, those that the teacher is responsible for handling). Without learning goals and operational procedures in place, a principal will spend countless hours clarifying, reminding, and backfilling, which is not a good use of time.

## Decide on a Planning System

It's vital for principals to identify a procedure for organizing priorities by the year, the month, the week, and the day. A daily to-do list is not enough. Such lists often contain lots of little tasks that are easy to cross off and don't address the big rocks. The tug of H.S.P.S. is so constant and so inexorable that principals need a foolproof ritual to bring year-end goals down to ground level. For me, this took place in a two-hour planning block every Sunday morning when I looked at my targets for the year, broke them down into monthly deliverables, and ensured that I was taking next steps in all key areas in the week ahead.

For daily to-do lists, I tried a variety of calendars and organizational formats and finally designed and made copies of a sheet that I filled in as I prepared for each day. It had boxes for the seven periods of the day (to keep my activities in synch with teachers' and students' daily rhythm), for before- and after-school time (when there were fewer interruptions), and for my weekly goals (which I copied over every day to keep them in my face) and a line for each homeroom (where I could jot student and staff member birthdays and other reasons for classroom visits). As I filled in meetings, teacher conferences, and phone calls each day, I kept the master schedule in front of me and made notes to talk to teachers during their free periods. At the end of most days, I was lucky if I had done half of the items on my list—hopefully I'd done the ones with red stars! When planning for the next day, I thought hard about whether the items I hadn't done were really important and either ditched them or copied them onto the next day's blank sheet along with a host of new items.

## Schedule Key Meetings

Unless your most important teams have regular, preset meetings, the hurly-burly of events will prevent most

**Mission:** Giving staff members and students a clear sense of direction

**Climate:** Making the school a safe place that runs smoothly

**Alignment:** Meshing curriculum and assessments with state standards

**Resources:** Getting teachers the tools they need to be effective

**Instruction:** Nurturing the best possible teaching in every classroom

**Hiring:** Using every vacancy to bring in excellent teachers

**Interim assessments:** Using data to continuously improve teaching

**Collaboration:** Fostering constant sharing of ideas and resources

**Results:** Keeping supervision, professional development, and teams focused on outcomes

**Parents:** Maximizing family support of students' education

meetings from happening. People are busy. Students are demanding. There's always too much to do. But regular meetings of the leadership team, grade-level and subject-area teams, the student support team (for case conferences on high-risk students), and other teams are vital to the long-range effectiveness of a school, and the teams deserve to have regular meeting times that are cancelled only for genuine emergencies. Weekly meetings of same-subject, same-grade teacher teams are particularly important and deserve double blocks of uninterrupted time. This is where the all-important professional learning community work of continuously improving teaching and learning can take place—but that won't happen unless the times are carved in stone on everyone's calendars.

## Write It Down

Principals must have a good system for recording information during the day, prioritizing, and following up. The challenge for principals is remembering and acting on the myriad items that flood their brains every day. The plain fact is that even principals with brilliant memories can't possibly retain all the stuff that comes at them. But when they lose track of things and don't follow up, their credibility with teachers, students, and parents goes down the drain—and their blood pressure goes up. Allen (2001) correctly said that writing things down is a stress-reducer.

Mastering the flow of information and being organized also makes you credible and effective.

One impediment is that clothing fashions conspire to prevent principals from writing things down. Women's pants, shirts, and jackets rarely have pockets designed to hold pens, notepads, cell phones, and BlackBerries—and a surprising number of men refuse to put a pen and piece of paper in their shirt pockets because when they were teenagers, kids who did this were called nerds. So what's a principal to do? Get over it. Buy practical clothes, use your shirt pocket, or carry around a clipboard. If you don't have ready access to a pen and paper (or an electronic device with a good thumb pad), you're going to forget vital stuff and get a reputation as a flake.

After several years of writing everything down on one pad of paper and then spending more than an hour unpacking my lists at the end of the day, I developed a system of keeping several notecards in my shirt pocket—one for immediate action items, one for e-mails I needed to send, one for staff memo ideas, one for parent letter ideas, and a few for ideas that could be popped straight into files in my office (e.g., a team-building activity for next year's opening staff meeting). This simple way of pre-sorting ideas saved a lot of time every day.

One of the shibboleths of time management is that you should handle every piece of paper only once. This might work for people in the business world, but it absolutely won't work for school leaders, who have countless over-the-transom events and an unmanageable number of direct reports. But what is to be done with all those notes and letters and stuff that build up during the day? My system was to quickly scan the contents of my in-basket several times a day and use the 15-second rule: if an item couldn't be signed, delegated, or thrown away in 15 seconds, it went onto my after-hours pile. I plowed through that pile late in the day and often took some of it home. During the day I was a people person, not a paper pusher.

The other thing I did in the late afternoon was respond to and send e-mail messages. I believe it's a huge mistake to try to stay on top of e-mail during the day. My advice is to turn off the alert that announces the arrival of new e-mails; your computer is not a ringing phone. The beauty of e-mail is that it's asynchronous—you can answer at your convenience (but hopefully within 24 hours). Schedule one or two 30-minute blocks (perhaps early morning and late afternoon) when you answer and send e-mail messages in concentrated, efficient bursts. Let people know your e-mail philosophy so that they won't expect you to respond instantly. The best way to do this is have an automatic reply

## The Big Rocks

Anonymous

One day an expert in time management was speaking to a group of business students and to drive home a point, used an illustration those students will never forget. As he stood in front of the group of high-powered overachievers, he said, "Okay, time for a quiz."

He pulled out a one-gallon, wide-mouth mason jar and set it on the table in front of him. Then he produced about a dozen fist-sized rocks and carefully placed them, one at a time, into the jar. When the jar was filled to the top and no more rocks would fit inside, he asked, "Is this jar full?"

Everyone in the class said, "Yes."

"Really?" he said. He reached under the table and pulled out a bucket of gravel. He dumped some gravel in and shook the jar, causing pieces of gravel to work themselves down into the space between the big rocks.

He asked the group once more, "Is the jar full?" By this time, the class was on to him. "Probably not," one of them answered.

"Good," he replied. He reached under the table and brought out a bucket of sand. He started dumping the sand into the jar and it went into all the spaces left between the rocks and the gravel. Once more he asked the question, "Is the jar full?"

"No," the class shouted. Once again he said, "Good." He grabbed a pitcher of water and began to pour it in until the jar was filled to the brim.

Then he looked at the class and asked, "What is the point of this illustration?" One eager beaver raised his hand and said, "The point is, no matter how full your schedule is, if you try really hard you can always fit some more things into it!"

"No," the speaker replied, "that is not the point. The truth this illustration teaches us is that if you don't put the big rocks in first, you'll never get them in at all."



Source: Covey, S. [1996]. *First things first*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

message on your computer all the time that says something like this: "I check e-mail each weekday afternoon after 3:00 p.m. If your message is urgent, please call 617-555-0100."

Even if you've developed an excellent system for writing things down and relegating paperwork and e-mail to times outside the school day, it's still possible to drop the ball on important stuff if you fall victim to the all-too-common affliction PAUT (Putting Aside Unpleasant Tasks). Be honest: what are the things that you hate to do and creatively avoid? Mine were financial planning and dealing with notes from angry people. Some of my colleagues put off writing teacher evaluations and the school improvement plan. We were brilliant at staying busy with all the "easy" stuff for days without getting to the odious tasks. As Pogo Possum said, "We have met the enemy and he is us."

So a key time management task is having a clear sense of what your PAUT demons are and developing a strategy to force yourself to do them. For example, Eric Dawson, the head of Peace Games, hated working on the budget, and when it was time to finally do the dirty deed, he w

put on a special hat and everyone in the office knew they needed to leave him alone (personal communication, January 13, 2008).

Another activity that often gets put off is filing—and the consequence is not being able to put your hands on important papers when you really need them. In my office, the pile built up inexorably, and every month or so, I would come in on a Saturday morning, put on some good music, and get it done. It was actually very satisfying.

### Delegate, Delegate, Delegate

It's vital to put competent people in key roles and delegate maximum responsibility to them. Some principals (I was one of them) have a strong urge to do everything themselves and get impatient when others don't do things just right. This tendency needs to be curbed. The key to long-range sanity and effectiveness is hiring good people, nurturing them, and refraining from micromanagement. For principals who have made hiring mistakes or taken over schools with less-than-stellar staff



## Time Management Rubric

### 4 EXPERT

- I have a laserlike focus on student achievement and my strategic plan for the year.
- Staff members know exactly what is expected of them in terms of classroom instruction and discipline.
- I have an effective personal planning system for the year, the month, the week, and the day.
- All key teams (e.g., leadership, grade-level, SST) are scheduled to meet on a regular basis.
- I have a foolproof system for writing things down, prioritizing, and following up.
- I have highly competent people in key roles and delegate maximum responsibility to them.
- I visit 3–5 classrooms a day and give face-to-face feedback to each teacher within 24 hours.
- I have effective strategies for preventing or deflecting time-wasting crises and activities.
- I take care of myself, including family, health, exercise, sleep, and vacations.
- I regularly evaluate progress toward my goals and work on continuous improvement.

### 3 PROFICIENT

- I keep student achievement and my strategic plan in mind every day.
- Most of my staff members know what is expected in terms of classroom instruction and discipline.
- I write down a list of what I want to accomplish each week and each day.
- Several key team meetings are scheduled to occur on a regular basis.
- I always write important things down and follow up on the most critical ones.
- Most of my key staff members are competent and I give them plenty of responsibility.
- I get into some classrooms every day and give personal feedback to each teacher.
- I am quite good at preventing or deflecting most time-wasting crises and activities.
- I try hard to balance my job with my family, health, exercise, sleep, and vacations.
- I periodically review how I am doing on my weekly goals and try to do better.

members, it may take several years before full delegation is possible. But the goal is clear: teachers handling instruction and virtually all discipline problems, teacher teams using data to continuously improve teaching and learning, counselors preventing or dealing with students' emotional problems, custodians handling the physical plant, students taking increasing responsibility for their own learning, and the principal freed up to orchestrate the whole process and to focus relentlessly on the big rocks (while occasionally picking up trash in the corridors).

Of course, teachers and other staff members can't do their jobs when they are pulled out for professional development and other meetings. Airline pilots aren't trained while they are flying planes, and I feel very strongly that educators' training and meetings should not encroach on contact time with students. The same goes for principals, who need to be in their buildings 95% of the time if they are going to exercise effective leadership. Especially with students who are at risk, every minute counts.

It's also important that your staff has a clear mandate

to tell you things you might not necessarily want to hear. Some of the worst management failures (think of the *Challenger* disaster) occur when leaders wall themselves off from honest feedback.

## Get Into Classrooms

Teachers crave feedback. Conventional evaluations, however, can take several hours for each teacher (pre-observation, dog-and-pony show, write-up, and post-conference), have four built-in flaws: they don't give principals a very accurate picture of day-to-day instruction, they put a premium on pleasing the boss with a razzle-dazzle lesson versus long-term student learning, they rarely improve teaching, and they are so daunting and time-consuming that they prevent principals from being in classrooms on a frequent basis. Except for gathering evidence to dismiss an ineffective teacher, conventional evaluation is a poor use of a principal's valuable time.

But what's the alternative? Short, unannounced observations of 5–15 minutes each with candid, face-to-face

## 2 DEVELOPING

- a. I periodically remind myself of my strategic plan and the goal of student achievement.
- b. I often have to remind teachers of policies on instruction and discipline.
- c. I come to work with a list of what I want to accomplish that day.
- d. Each month, I have to schedule key meetings because they are not in people's calendars.
- e. I try to write things down but am swamped by events and sometimes don't follow up.
- f. Because several of my key staff members are not competent, I hesitate to delegate to them.
- g. I try to get into classrooms as much as possible, but many days I don't succeed.
- h. I try to prevent them, but crises and time-wasters sometimes eat up large chunks of time.
- i. My family, health, exercise, sleep, and vacations are suffering because of my job.
- j. I try to keep track of how I am doing on my goals.

## 1 NOVICE

- a. Each day is driven by events, not by my long-term goals.
- b. I am constantly reminding staff members to use better procedures for instruction and discipline.
- c. I have a list in my head of what I want to accomplish each day but sometimes lose track.
- d. I call grade-level, curriculum, and other meetings when there is a crisis or an immediate need.
- e. I trust my memory to retain important tasks, but I sometimes forget and drop the ball.
- f. My key staff members are not that competent and I must do almost everything myself.
- g. I am so busy that I rarely visit classrooms.
- h. Large amounts of each day are consumed by crises and time-wasting activities.
- i. I neglect my family, rarely exercise, don't sleep enough, and am in poor health.
- j. I occasionally berate myself for not accomplishing my long-range goals.

feedback to each teacher, ideally within 24 hours. I used this system in the latter years of my principalship, trying hard to get into five classrooms a day, and it kept me in touch with instruction, stimulated hundreds of substantive discussions about teaching and learning each year, and gave me the time and energy to work on the heart of the matter (i.e., orchestrating a low-stakes process of teacher teams that focus on student learning and continuously improving instruction).

In addition to frequent classroom visits, I also made a point of being out front when students arrived in the morning, doing at least one lunch duty a day, personally wishing every student and staff member happy birthday on their special day, and being outside during dismissal. Visibility and accessibility really matter in this job.

### Avoid Time-Wasters

A key to committing time to the right stuff is preventing or deflecting time-consuming crises and activities. School leaders' work falls into three buckets: activities that add value (i.e., they boost achievement for all students); necessary activities that aren't sexy but keep the school running (e.g., ordering supplies, doing the budget); and activities that are a waste of time (e.g., redoing things that weren't done right the first time) (Freeston & Costa, 1998). Effective principals strive constantly to maximize value-added work and minimize waste work, but this is a daily struggle. It's truly astonishing how much time a screwup can consume.

One morning I was walking briskly down a corridor to see a teacher, and as I passed a classroom, I thought I heard another teacher utter the word "jackass" in front of a roomful of students. I was distracted by my immediate task and didn't focus on what I had heard, but the next day, there was a huge ruckus: a parent stormed into the school, bypassed the office, and confronted the teacher for calling her daughter a jackass. There ensued a chain of events, starting with physically separating the teacher and the parent, that easily consumed 20 hours of my time. If I had been more attentive and promptly asked the teacher about his comment (his defense was that he told the student that she was acting like a jackass) and phoned the mother immediately, the next few days would have been far more productive. True, some crises can't be avoided, but anything principals can do to prevent or deflect time-wasting activities saves precious energy that can be devoted to the real work of school leadership.

There are lots of other ways to cut down on wasted time, including clear agendas and crisp closure for meetings,



multitasking (within reason), and spending very little time in your office for those frequent drop-ins that invariably start with the words, "Got a minute?" A sitting principal is a sitting duck.

### Take Care of Yourself

It's vital to invest your time in your family, your health, exercise, sleep, and vacations. The principalship is an intensely demanding job and there are no shortcuts; even skillful and strategic time managers are exhausted at the end of most weeks. But if you burn out, your students and staff members will be poorly served. Good time management includes knowing your limits; planning for the long haul; and finding ways to fuel your physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual energy (Patterson, 2007).

Here are some suggestions: exercise faithfully (three times a week is the target most doctors agree on); eat the right foods (breakfast is the most important meal); get enough sleep; carve out regular time for relaxation and fun (one of my nonnegotiables was watching a movie with my wife every Friday evening); build a support system (e.g., a critical friends group, a mentor, and a sensitive and devoted significant other); and orchestrate small and large wins (there's nothing like success to give us an extra shot of optimism and energy).

### Take Stock

Regularly evaluate your time management. I suggest using the attached rubric to score yourself periodically (perhaps every six months). Give yourself a pat on the back for the areas in which you are proficient and expert and set goals for improving your low-scoring areas. The goal is to have all your scores in the top two levels; if you do, you'll be working hard, working smart, and working deep, which will result in high achievement for all your students. **PL**

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