

# Make Time for Strategic Work by Redefining Your Role as a Leader

Philip Hunter

Talk to leaders at all levels, and you'll start hearing similar themes. They will tell you how incredibly busy they are with emails, reports, group status update meetings, one-on-one check-ins, and fighting fires. They will also tell you, if they're being honest, that they often feel like they're not getting much done – they aren't feeling that deep level of satisfaction and accomplishment.

While the “tactical busy work” is part of every leader's responsibility, this is meant to be only a small portion of a leader's role. More and more, however, we're hearing from leaders that they have very little room to engage in the truly strategic work for which they are responsible, and which provides incredible value, such as anticipating future challenges, aligning teams, or transforming how work gets done.

How did we get here? And, what can you do to shift the scales to give yourself more time for [deep work](#), Cal Newport's concept of distraction-free work that creates new value by allowing your cognitive abilities to be maximized? According to Newport, the ability to engage in this type of deeply focused work is a “superpower” that is all too often underutilized in today's workplaces, despite being greatly needed. It's time for a change.

## Old habits and competing demands

For most senior leaders, early career credibility is built and defined by getting things done and being an expert in a particular area. In fact, it may have been precisely that propensity to be reliable and knowledgeable that got you promoted to progressively more senior roles in the first place. It's no surprise, then, that years of focusing on the tactical turned into a well-ingrained habit, one that's hard to break even as the strategic part of your portfolio gradually increased.

To make things even more challenging, leaders are consistently told that the way to be a supportive leader is to “be there” for your team. And what could be more supportive than being accessible around the clock, ready to respond to team members 24/7? Isn't that what great leadership is? So, you end up accepting every meeting request, answering every email, and providing feedback on every document because if you don't, you feel that you aren't supporting your team the way that you ought to be.

Take Brian, the leader of a 2,500-person organization with multiple office locations around Toronto (names have been changed to protect individual identities). Over the past year, his senior leaders were adrift. They weren't fostering connections with their direct reports and providing the kind of leadership that their teams needed. Brian took to compensating for this gap by personally visiting one or two locations every day to connect directly with the frontline workers to show that senior leaders "were there" for them.

Although well-intentioned, this approach trapped Brian in an endless cycle that left no room for the strategic aspects of his role. Nothing was changing to enable his executive team to step in and fill the gap, so he would have to continue circling the different locations indefinitely if he wanted the frontline workers to feel supported.

**Your desire to be accessible creates a dependency that is hard to break. Your team members get used to reaching out for help and don't take the opportunity to step up and solve problems themselves.**

Being there for your team all the time may be necessary in times of crisis, when teams need extra direction and stability. And, let's be honest, it feels good: your team members get their questions answered and you have the satisfaction of helping them. The trap here, however, is that your desire to be accessible creates a dependency that is hard to break. Your team members get used to reaching out for help and don't take the opportunity to step up and solve problems themselves. Moreover, you don't get the opportunity to grow as a leader because you are stuck doing the same thing that you were doing in a more junior role.

In the end, Brian realized that he needed to invest more time developing the strategic direction for the organization – and that he needed to spend some of this time alone. Taking time away to limit the noise, quiet his mind and focus on the bigger picture helped Brian re-engage more

purposefully with his senior team. He was able to build out the strategy further and equip his senior leaders to lead their respective teams.

## Protecting your time is not the entire answer

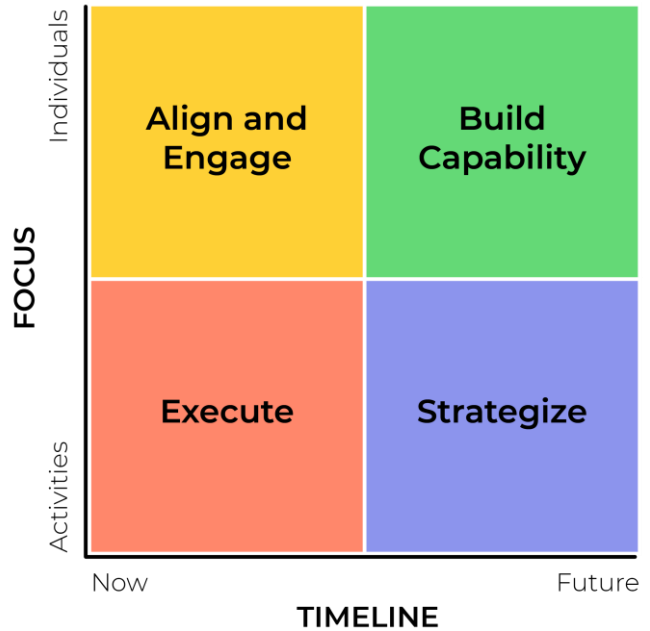
You may have already tried some techniques to give yourself more time for deep work: blocking your calendar, closing your email, setting your phone to airplane mode. But you are left with a nagging feeling that you are abandoning your team, so you can't quite take full advantage of the time you have set aside.

Take Jessica, for example, a Sales and Marketing leader. Jessica planned to take three days away from her team to reset and do some long-term planning. She blocked off her calendar and notified her team of her intention to step away, but immediately followed up with "If anything comes up, you can call me, and I'll be checking my email too." And so that dedicated time away quickly turned into the same daily routine of check-ins and emails.

# Redefining your contribution as a leader

It's not that blocking your calendar and other external ways of protecting your time don't work. It's just that they are the second step in the process. The first step, and one that most leaders skip over, is to look inward first and change your beliefs about how you contribute as a leader.

The value you bring to the organization as a senior leader is largely defined by your strategic work. In fact, this type of work is not in competition with supporting your team; it is done *in service* of supporting your team and the business or organization more broadly. By setting a longer-term vision, providing an [enterprise-wide view](#) of their work, or investigating strategic opportunities, you are creating a path for your team's long-term success. And, by stepping away once in a while to focus on this work, you foster independence in your team members and create opportunities for them to grow.



One way to think about the breakdown of your portfolio as a leader is in four quadrants defined by the focus area and the timeline. Too often, leaders get pulled solely into the left-hand quadrants defined by short-term execution on activities and immediate interactions with their people, which often tend to be directive and correctional in nature. But your role as a leader also includes the right-hand quadrants defined by a long-term strategy for your area and [building the capabilities of your people](#). Oftentimes, leaders struggle to thrive in these areas as the activities here are not typically tasks that can be checked off a list or quickly brought to closure. To help facilitate the mindset shift from focusing solely on short-term execution, consider, what does contribution look like for you in all four quadrants?

This mindset shift is what makes protecting your time possible: once you frame your contribution to the organization differently, those nagging feelings and beliefs subside, and you can take full advantage of the time you have set aside.

# Sustaining the new perspective

Habitual ways of thinking are hard to overcome: when things get busy or challenging, we have a tendency to revert to them. What can you do to ensure that this becomes a sustained shift in perspective? For one, take ownership of your decision and communicate it to your team. Tell them why you will be unavailable at times, what you are working on, and how it will contribute to the team. Don't send mixed messages that you are stepping

away but will also be available “if something comes up.” Instead, encourage your team members to step up and collaborate to solve challenges in your absence.

Create a way to hold yourself accountable for how you are spending your time. For example, you can color-code the activities in your calendar so that you can tell, at a glance, how much of your week is going to tactical versus strategic work. Over time, you may notice some patterns around when your priorities tend to get out of balance and will be able course-correct before you slide back into old habits.

And, once you have established your new perspective on how you contribute as a senior leader, go back to some of those strategies you might have tried in the past to protect your deep work time: having meeting-free days, putting away your phone, closing your email. You may also find that physically stepping away from your computer and phone and going for a walk is helpful. You’ll discover that, with a new mindset, these tactics become easier to deploy. Your feelings of guilt about not “being there” for your team will be replaced by feelings of accomplishment as you finally craft that strategy or tackle that difficult challenge. You will be fully stepping into your leadership role and the value it brings to your team and your organization.

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