Management Time: Who’s Got the Monkey?

by William Oncken, Jr., and Donald L. Wass

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The burdens of subordinates always seem to end up on the manager’s back. Here’s how to get rid of them.

Why is it that managers are typically running out of time while their subordinates are typically running out of work? Here we shall explore the meaning of management time as it relates to the interaction between managers and their bosses, their peers, and their subordinates.

Specifically, we shall deal with three kinds of management time:

- **Boss-imposed time** – used to accomplish those activities that the boss requires and that the manager cannot disregard without direct and swift penalty.
- **System-imposed time** – used to accommodate requests from peers for active support. Neglecting these requests will also result in penalties, though not always as direct or swift.
- **Self-imposed time** – used to do those things that the manager originates or agrees to do. A certain portion of this
kind of time, however, will be taken by subordinates and is called subordi-
nate-imposed time. The remaining portion will be the manager’s own
and is called discretionary time. Self-imposed time is not subject to
penalty since neither the boss nor the system can discipline the man-
ger for not doing what they didn’t know he had intended to do in the
first place.

To accommodate those demands, managers need to control the timing
and the content of what they do. Since what their bosses and the sys-
tem impose on them are subject to penalty, managers cannot tamper with those requirements. Thus their self-imposed time becomes their ma-
jor area of concern.

Managers should try to increase the discretionary component of
their self-imposed time by minimizing or doing away with the subordi-
nate component. They will then use the added increment to get better
control over their boss-imposed and system-imposed activities. Most
managers spend much more time dealing with subordinates' problems
than they even faintly realize. Hence we shall use the monkey-on-the-
back metaphor to examine how subordinate-imposed time comes into
being and what the superior can do about it.

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tion for presidents and CEOs.

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For its reissue as a Classic, the Harvard Business Review asked Stephen R. Covey to provide a commentary.

Where Is the Monkey?

Let us imagine that a manager is walking down the hall and that he
notices one of his subordinates, Jones, coming his way. When the
two meet, Jones greets the manager with, “Good morning. By the way,
we’ve got a problem. You see....” As Jones continues, the manager recog-
nizes in this problem the two characteristics common to all the prob-
lems his subordinates gratuitously bring to his attention. Namely, the
manager knows [a] enough to get involved, but [b] not enough to make
the on-the-spot decision expected of him. Eventually, the manager says,
“So glad you brought this up. I’m in a rush right now. Meanwhile, let me
think about it, and I’ll let you know.” Then he and Jones part company.

Let us analyze what just happened. Before the two of them met, on
whose back was the “monkey”? The subordinate’s. After they parted, on
whose back was it? The manager’s. Subordinate-imposed time begins
the moment a monkey successfully leaps from the back of a subordinate
to the back of his or her superior and does not end until the monkey is re-
turned to its proper owner for care and feeding. In accepting the mon-
key, the manager has voluntarily assumed a position subordinate to his
subordinate. That is, he has allowed Jones to make him her subordinate by
doing two things a subordinate is generally expected to do for a boss –
the manager has accepted a responsibility from his subordinate, and the
manager has promised her a progress report.

The subordinate, to make sure the manager does not miss this point, will later stick her head in the man-
ger’s office and cheerily query, “How’s it coming?” (This is called super-
vision.)

Or let us imagine in concluding a conference with Johnson, another
subordinate, the manager’s parting words are, “Fine. Send me a memo
on that.”

Let us analyze this one. The mon-
key is now on the subordinate’s back
because the next move is his, but it
is poised for a leap. Watch that mon-
key. Johnson dutifully writes the re-
quested memo and drops it in his
out-basket. Shortly thereafter, the
manager plucks it from his in-basket and
reads it. Whose move is it now? The manager’s. If he does not make
that move soon, he will get a follow-up memo from the subordinate.
(This is another form of supervision.) The longer the manager de-
lays, the more frustrated the subordi-
dinate will become (he’ll be spinning
his wheels) and the more guilty the
manager will feel (his backlog of subordinate-imposed time will be
mounting!).

Or suppose once again that at a
meeting with a third subordinate,
Smith, the manager agrees to provide
all the necessary backing for a public relations proposal he has just asked
Smith to develop. The manager’s parting words to her are, “Just let me
know how I can help.”

Now let us analyze this. Again the
monkey is initially on the subordi-
inate’s back. But for how long? Smith
realizes that she cannot let the man-
ger “know” until her proposal has
the manager’s approval. And from
experience, she also realizes that her
proposal will likely be sitting in the
manager’s briefcase for weeks before
he eventually gets to it. Who’s really
got the monkey? Who will be check-
ing up on whom? Wheel spinning and bottlenecking are well on their
way again.

A fourth subordinate, Reed, has just
been transferred from another part of the company so that he can
launch and eventually manage a newly created business venture. The
manager has said they should get to-
gether soon to hammer out a set of
objectives for the new job, adding, “I
will draw up an initial draft for dis-

cussion with you.”

Let us analyze this one, too. The
subordinate has the new job [by for-
mal assignment] and the full respon-
sibility [by formal delegation], but
the manager has the next move. Un-
til he makes it, he will have the mon-
key, and the subordinate will be im-
mobilized.

Why does all of this happen? Be-
cause in each instance the manager and the subordinate assume at the
outset, wittingly or unwittingly, that the matter under consideration is a
joint problem. The monkey in each case begins its career astride both
their backs. All it has to do is move the wrong leg, and—presto!—the sub-
ordinate deviously disappears. The man-
ger is thus left with another acquisi-
tion for his menagerie. Of course,
monkeys can be trained not to move
the wrong leg. But it is easier to pre-
vent them from straddling backs in
the first place.

Who Is Working for Whom?
Let us suppose that these same four
subordinates are so thoughtful and
considerate of their superior’s time
that they take pains to allow no more
than three monkeys to leap from
each of their backs to his in any one
day. In a five-day week, the manager
will have picked up 60 screaming
monkeys—far too many to do any-
thing about them individually. So he
spends his subordinate-imposed
time juggling his “priorities.”

Late Friday afternoon, the manager
is in his office with the door closed
for privacy so he can contemplate
the situation, while his subordinates
are waiting outside to get their last
chance before the weekend to re-
mind him that he will have to “fish
or cut bait.” Imagine what they are
saying to one another about the man-
ger as they wait: “What a bottle-
neck. He just can’t make up his mind. How anyone ever got that high
up in our company without being
able to make a decision we’ll never
know.”

Worst of all, the reason the man-
ger cannot make any of these “next
moves” is that his time is almost en-
tirely eaten up by meeting his own
boss-imposed and system-imposed
requirements. To control those tasks,
he needs discretionary time that is
in turn denied him when he is pre-
occupied with all these monkeys. The
manager is caught in a vicious circle.

The instant your problem becomes
my problem, you no longer have a problem. I
cannot help a person who hasn’t got
mine, you no longer have a problem. I
The manager returns to the office
Monday morning just late enough so
that his four subordinates have col-
clected outside his office waiting to
see him about their monkeys. He
calls them in one by one. The pur-
pose of each interview is to take a
monkey, place it on the desk be-
hind them, and figure out together
how the next move might conceiv-
ably be the subordinate’s. For certain
monkeys, that will take some doing.
The subordinate’s next move may be
so elusive that the manager may de-
cline—just for now—merely to let
the monkey sleep on the subordi-
nate’s back overnight and have him
or her return with it at an appointed
time the next morning to continue
the joint quest for a more substan-
tive move by the subordinate. [Mon-
keys sleep just as soundly overnight
on subordinates’ backs as they do on
superiors.’]

In accepting the
monkey, the manager
has voluntarily assumed
a position subordinate
to his subordinate.

In a constructive exercise in the in-
terim, the manager strolls by the
subordinate’s office, sticks his head
in the door, and cheerily asks,
“How’s it coming?” (The time con-
sumed in doing this is discretionary
for the manager and boss imposed
for the subordinate.)

When the subordinate (with the
monkey on his or her back) and the
manager meet at the appointed hour
the next day, the manager explains
the ground rules in words to this
effect:

“At no time while I am helping you
with this or any other problem will
your problem become my problem.
The instant your problem becomes
mine, you no longer have a problem. I
cannot help a person who hasn’t got
a problem.

“When this meeting is over, the
subordinate’s back overnight and have him
or her return with it at an appointed
time the next morning to continue
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tive move by the subordinate. [Mon-
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As each subordinate leaves the of-

cine, the manager is rewarded by the
sight of a monkey leaving his office
on the subordinate’s back. For the
next 24 hours, the subordinate will
not be waiting for the manager; in-
stead, the manager will be waiting
for the subordinate.

Later, as if to remind himself that
there is no law against his engaging

cine, the manager returns to the of-

night, a foursome. Guess who?

That does it. He now knows who
is really working for whom. More-
over, he now sees that if he actually
accomplishes during this weekend
what he came to accomplish, his
subordinates’ morale will go up so
sharply that they will each raise the
limit on the number of monkeys
they will let jump from their backs
to his. In short, he now sees, with
the clarity of a revelation on a moun-
taintop, that the more he gets caught
up, the more he will fall behind.

He leaves the office with the speed
of a person running away from a
plague. His plan! To get caught up
on something else he hasn’t had
time for in years: a weekend with his
family. [This is one of the many vari-
eties of discretionary time.]

Sunday night he enjoys ten hours
of sweet, untroubled slumber, be-
cause he has clear-cut plans for Mon-
day. He is going to get rid of his sub-
ordinate-imposed time. In exchange,
he will get an equal amount of dis-
cretionary time, part of which he
will spend with his subordinates to
make sure that they learn the diffi-
cult but rewarding managerial art
called “The Care and Feeding of
Monkeys.”

The manager will also have plenty
of discretionary time left over for
getting control of the timing and the
content not only of his boss-imposed
time but also of his system-imposed
time. It may take months, but com-
pared with the way things have
been, the rewards will be enormous.
His ultimate objective is to manage
his time.

Getting Rid of the Monkeys
The manager returns to the office
Monday morning just late enough so
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clected outside his office waiting to
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calls them in one by one. The pur-
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monkey, place it on the desk be-
hind them, and figure out together
how the next move might conceiv-
ably be the subordinate’s. For certain
monkeys, that will take some doing.
The subordinate’s next move may be
only to see, on the nearest green of
the golf course across from his office
window, a foursome. Guess who?

Worst of all, the reason the man-
ger may decline—just for now—merely to let
the monkey sleep on the subordi-
nate’s back overnight and have him
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Making Time for Gorillas
by Stephen R. Covey

When Bill Oncken wrote this article in 1974, managers were in a terrible bind. They were desperate for a way to free up their time, but command and control was the status quo. Managers felt they weren’t allowed to empower their subordinates to make decisions. Too dangerous. Too risky. That’s why Oncken’s message – give the monkey back to its rightful owner – involved a critically important paradigm shift. Many managers working today owe him a debt of gratitude.

It is something of an understatement, however, to observe that much has changed since Oncken’s radical recommendation. Command and control as a management philosophy is all but dead, and “empowerment” is the word of the day in most organizations trying to thrive in global, intensely competitive markets. But command and control stubbornly remains a common practice. Management thinkers and executives have discovered in the last decade that bosses cannot just give a monkey back to their subordinates and then merrily get on with their own business. Empowering subordinates is hard and complicated work.

The reason: when you give problems back to subordinates to solve themselves, you have to be sure that they have both the desire and the ability to do so. As every executive knows, that isn’t always the case. Enter a whole new set of problems. Empowerment often means you have to develop people, which is initially much more time consuming than solving the problem on your own.

Just as important, empowerment can only thrive when the whole organization buys into it – when formal systems and the informal culture support it. Managers need to be rewarded for delegating decisions and developing people. Otherwise, the degree of real empowerment in an organization will vary according to the beliefs and practices of individual managers.

But perhaps the most important lesson about empowerment is that effective delegation – the kind Oncken advocated – depends on a trusting relationship between a manager and his subordinate. Oncken’s message may have been ahead of his time, but what he suggested was still a fairly dictatorial solution. He basically told bosses, “Give the problem back!” Today, we know that this approach by itself is too authoritarian. To delegate effectively, executives need to establish a running dialogue with subordinates. They need to establish a partnership. After all, if subordinates are afraid of failing in front of their boss, they’ll keep coming back for help rather than truly take initiative.

Oncken’s article also doesn’t address an aspect of delegation that has greatly interested me during the past two decades – that many managers are actually eager to take on their subordinates’ monkeys. Nearly all the managers I talk with agree that their people are underutilized in their present jobs. But even some of the most successful, seemingly self-assured executives have talked about how hard it is to give up control to their subordinates.

I’ve come to attribute that eagerness for control to a common, deep-seated belief that rewards in life are scarce and fragile. Whether they learn it from their family, school, or athletics, many people establish an identity by comparing themselves with others. When they see others gain power, information, money, or recognition, for instance, they experience what the psychologist Abraham Maslow called “a feeling of deficiency” – a sense that something is being taken from them. That makes it hard for them to be genuinely happy about the success of others – even of their loved ones. Oncken implies that managers can easily give back or refuse monkeys, but many managers may subconsciously fear that a subordinate taking the initiative will make them appear a little less strong and a little more vulnerable.

How, then, do managers develop the inward security, the mentality of “abundance,” that would enable them to relinquish control and seek the growth and development of those around them? The work I’ve done with numerous organizations suggests that managers who live with integrity according to a principle-based value system are most likely to sustain an empowering style of leadership.

Given the times in which he wrote, it was no wonder that Oncken’s message resonated with managers. But it was reinforced by Oncken’s wonderful gift for storytelling. I got to know Oncken on the speaker’s circuit in the 1970s, and I was always impressed by how he dramatized his ideas in colorful detail. Like the Dilbert comic strip, Oncken had a tongue-in-cheek style that got to the core of managers’ frustrations and made them want to take back control of their time. And the monkey on your back wasn’t just a metaphor for Oncken – it was his personal symbol. I saw him several times walking through airports with a stuffed monkey on his shoulder.

I’m not surprised that his article is one of the two best-selling HBR articles ever. Even with all we know about empowerment, its vivid message is even more important and relevant now than it was 25 years ago. Indeed, Oncken’s insight is a basis for my own work on time management, in which I have people categorize their activities according to urgency and importance. I’ve heard from executives again and again that half or more of their time is spent on matters that are urgent but not important. They’re trapped in an endless cycle of dealing with other people’s monkeys, yet they’re reluctant to help those people take their own initiative. As a result, they’re often too busy to spend the time they need on the real gorillas in their organization. Oncken’s article remains a powerful wake-up call for managers who need to delegate effectively.

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be and which of us will make it.

“In those rare instances where the next move turns out to be mine, you and I will determine it together. I will not make any move alone.”

The manager follows this same line of thought with each subordinate until about 11 AM, when he realizes that he doesn’t have to close his door. His monkeys are gone. They will return – but by appointment only. His calendar will assure this.

Transferring the Initiative

What we have been driving at in this monkey-on-the-back analogy is that managers can transfer initiative back to their subordinates and keep it there. We have tried to highlight a truism as obvious as it is subtle: namely, before developing initiative

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in subordinates, the manager must see to it that they have the initiative. Once the manager takes it back, he will no longer have it and he can kiss his discretionary time good-bye. It will all revert to subordinate-imposed time.

Nor can the manager and the subordinate effectively have the same initiative at the same time. The opener, “Boss, we’ve got a problem,” implies this duality and represents, as noted earlier, a monkey astride two backs, which is a very bad way to start a monkey on its career. Let us, therefore, take a few moments to examine what we call “The Anatomy of Managerial Initiative.”

There are five degrees of initiative that the manager can exercise in relation to the boss and to the system:

1. wait until told (lowest initiative);
2. ask what to do;
3. recommend, then take resulting action;
4. act, but advise at once;
5. and act on own, then routinely report (highest initiative).

Clearly, the manager should be professional enough not to indulge in initiatives 1 and 2 in relation either to the boss or to the system. A manager who uses initiative 1 has no control over either the timing or the content of boss-imposed or system-imposed time and thereby forfeits any right to complain about what he or she is told to do or when. The manager who uses initiative 2 has control over the timing but not over the content. Initiatives 3, 4, and 5 leave the manager in control of both, with the greatest amount of control being exercised at level 5.

In relation to subordinates, the manager’s job is twofold. First, to outlaw the use of initiatives 1 and 2, thus giving subordinates no choice but to learn and master “Completed Staff Work.” Second, to see that for each problem leaving his or her office there is an agreed-upon level of initiative assigned to it, in addition to an agreed-upon time and place for the next manager-subordinate conference. The latter should be duly noted on the manager’s calendar.

The Care and Feeding of Monkeys

To further clarify our analogy between the monkey on the back and the processes of assigning and controlling, we shall refer briefly to the manager’s appointment schedule, which calls for five hard-and-fast rules governing the “Care and Feeding of Monkeys.” [Violation of these rules will cost discretionary time.]

Rule 1. Monkeys should be fed or shot. Otherwise, they will starve to death, and the manager will waste valuable time on postmortems or attempted resurrections.

Rule 2. The monkey population should be kept below the maximum number the manager has time to feed. Subordinates will find time to work as many monkeys as he or she finds time to feed, but no more. It shouldn’t take more than five to 15 minutes to feed a properly maintained monkey.

Rule 3. Monkeys should be fed by appointment only. The manager should not have to hunt down starving monkeys and feed them on a catch-as-catch-can basis.

Rule 4. Monkeys should be fed face-to-face or by telephone, but never by mail. (Remember – with mail, the next move will be the manager’s.) Documentation may add to the feeding process, but it cannot take the place of feeding.

Rule 5. Every monkey should have an assigned next feeding time and degree of initiative. These may be revised at any time by mutual consent but never allowed to become vague or indefinite. Otherwise, the monkey will either starve to death or wind up on the manager’s back.

“Get control over the timing and content of what you do” is appropriate advice for managing time. The first order of business is for the manager to enlarge his or her discretionary time by eliminating subordinate-imposed time. The second is for the manager to use a portion of this newfound discretionary time to see to it that each subordinate actually has the initiative and applies it. The third is for the manager to use another portion of the increased discretionary time to get and keep control of the timing and content of both boss-imposed and system-imposed time. All these steps will increase the manager’s leverage and enable the value of each hour spent in managing management time to multiply without theoretical limit.