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Management time: Who's got the monkey?

William Oncken, Jr. and Donald L. Wass

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Management time: Who's got the monkey?

*An analogy that
underscores the value
of assigning,
delegating, and controlling*

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

In any organization, the manager's bosses, peers, and subordinates—in return for their active support—impose some requirements, just as he imposes upon them some of his own where they are drawing upon his support. These demands on him constitute so much of the manager's time that successful leadership hinges on his ability to control this "monkey-on-the-back" input effectively.

Mr. Oncken is chairman of the board, The William Oncken Company of Texas, Inc., a management consulting firm. Mr. Wass is president of this company.

Why is it that managers are typically running out of time while their subordinates are typically running out of work? In this article, we shall explore the meaning of management time as it relates to the interaction between the manager and his boss, his own peers, and his subordinates.

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

Boss-imposed time—to accomplish those activities which the boss requires and which the manager cannot disregard without direct and swift penalty.

System-imposed time—to accommodate those requests to the manager for active support from his peers. This assistance must also be provided lest there be penalties, though not always direct or swift.

Self-imposed time—to do those things which the manager originates or agrees to do himself. A certain portion of this kind of time, however, will be taken by his subordinates and is called "subordinate-imposed time." The remaining portion will be his own and is called "discretionary time." Self-imposed time is not subject to penalty since neither the boss nor the system can discipline the manager for not doing what they did not know he had intended to do in the first place.

The management of time necessitates that the manager get control over the timing and content of what he does. Since what the boss and the system impose on him are backed up by penalty, he cannot tamper with those requirements. Thus his self-imposed time becomes his major area of concern.

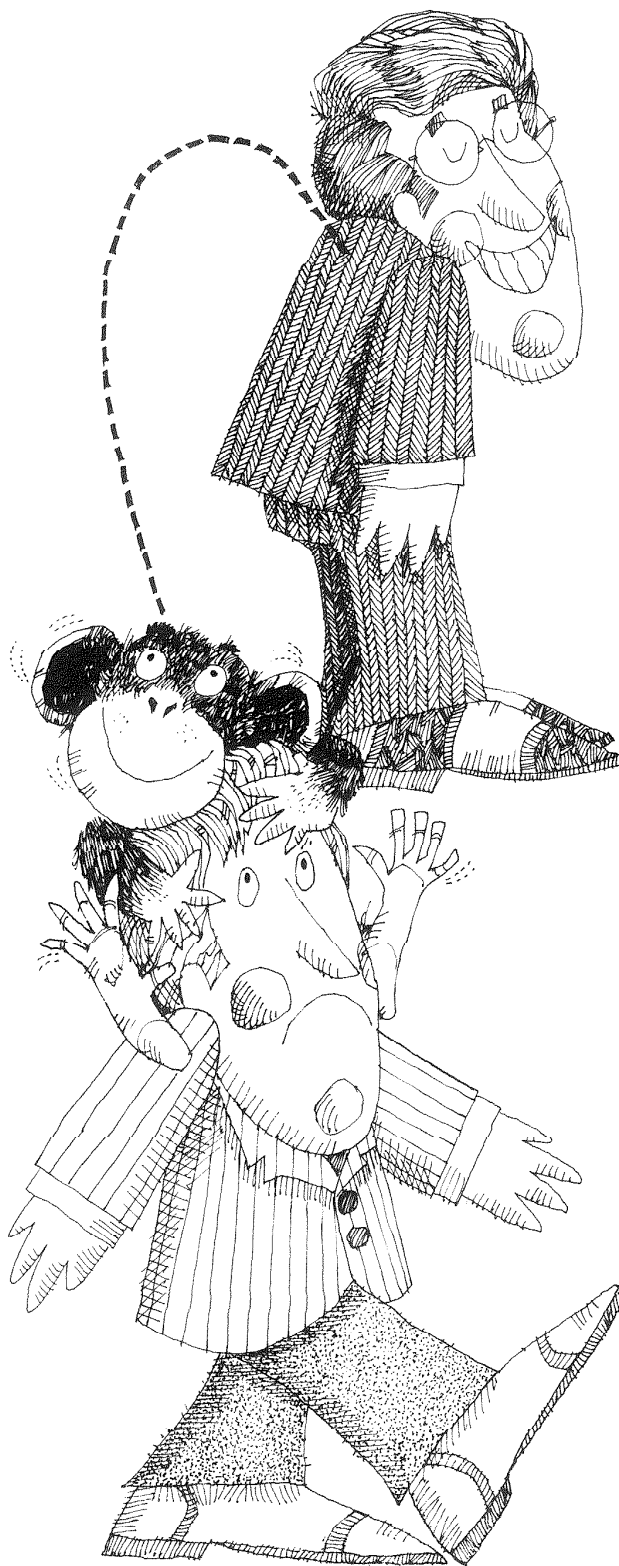
The manager's strategy is therefore to increase the "discretionary" component of his self-imposed time by minimizing or doing away with the "subordinate" component. He will then use the added increment to get better control over his boss-imposed and system-imposed activities. Most managers spend much more subordinate-imposed time than they even faintly realize. Hence we shall use a monkey-on-the-back analogy to examine how subordinate-imposed time comes into being and what the manager can do about it.

Where is the monkey?

Let us imagine that a manager is walking down the hall and that he notices one of his subordinates, Mr. A, coming up the hallway. When they are abreast of one another, Mr. A greets the manager with, "Good morning. By the way, we've got a problem. You see..." As Mr. A continues, the manager recognizes in this problem the same two characteristics common to all the problems 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 Mr. A part company.

Let us analyze what has 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 executes a leap from the back of a subordinate to the back of his superior and does not end until the monkey is returned to its proper owner for care and feeding.

In accepting the monkey, the manager has voluntarily assumed a position subordinate to his subordinate. That is, he has allowed Mr. A to make him his subordinate by doing two things a subordinate is generally expected to do for his boss—the manager has accepted a responsibility from his subordinate, and the manager has promised him a progress report.



The subordinate, to make sure the manager does not miss this point, will later stick his head in the manager's office and cheerily query, "How's it coming?" (This is called "supervision.")

Or let us imagine again, in concluding a working conference with another subordinate, Mr. B, the manager's parting words are, "Fine. Send me a memo on that."

Let us analyze this one. The monkey is now on the subordinate's back because the next move is his, but it is poised for a leap. Watch that monkey. Mr. B dutifully writes the requested memo and drops it in his outbasket. Shortly thereafter, the manager plucks it from his inbasket 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 delays, the more frustrated the subordinate 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, Mr. C, the manager agrees to provide all the necessary backing for a public relations proposal he has just asked Mr. C to develop. The manager's parting words to him are, "Just let me know how I can help."

Now let us analyze this. Here the monkey is initially on the subordinate's back. But for how long? Mr. C realizes that he cannot let the manager "know" until his proposal has the manager's approval. And from experience, he also realizes that his proposal will likely be sitting in the manager's briefcase for weeks waiting for him to eventually get to it. Who's really got the monkey? Who will be checking up on whom? Wheel-spinning and bottlenecks are on their way again.

A fourth subordinate, Mr. D, has just been transferred from another part of the company in order to launch and eventually manage a newly created business venture. The manager has told him that they should get together soon to hammer out a set of objectives for his new job, and that "I will draw up an initial draft for discussion with you."

Let us analyze this one, too. The subordinate has the new job (by formal assignment) and the full responsibility (by formal delegation), but the manager has the next move. Until he makes it, he will

have the monkey and the subordinate will be immobilized.

Why does it all happen? Because 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 now is move the wrong leg, and presto—the subordinate deftly disappears. The manager is thus left with another acquisition to his menagerie. Of course, monkeys can be trained not to move the wrong leg. But it is easier to prevent them from straddling backs in the first place.

Who is working for whom?

To make what follows more credible, let us suppose that these same four subordinates are so thoughtful and considerate of the manager's time that they are at 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 anything about individually. So he spends the subordinate-imposed time juggling his "priorities."

Late Friday afternoon, the manager is in his office with the door closed for privacy in order to contemplate the situation, while his subordinates are waiting outside to get a last chance before the weekend to remind him that he will have to "fish or cut bait." Imagine what they are saying to each other about the manager as they wait: "What a bottleneck. 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 manager cannot make any of these "next moves" is that his time is almost entirely eaten up in meeting his own boss-imposed and system-imposed requirements. To get control of these, he needs discretionary time that is in turn denied him when he is preoccupied with all these monkeys. The manager is caught in a vicious circle.

But time is a-wasting (an understatement). The manager calls his secretary on the intercom and instructs her to tell his subordinates that he will be unavailable to see them until Monday morning. At 7:00 p.m., he drives home, intending with firm resolve to return to the office tomorrow to get caught up over the weekend. He returns bright and early the next day only to see, on the nearest green of the

golf course across from his office window, a foursome. Guess who?

That does it. He now knows *who* is really working for *whom*. Moreover, 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 mountaintop, that the more he gets caught up, the more he will fall behind.

He leaves the office with the speed of a man 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 varieties of discretionary time.)

Sunday night he enjoys ten hours of sweet, untroubled slumber, because he has clear-cut plans for Monday. He is going to get rid of his subordinate-imposed time. In exchange, he will get an equal amount of discretionary time, part of which he will spend with his subordinates to see that they learn the difficult 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 content not only of his boss-imposed time but of his system-imposed time as well. All of this may take months, but compared with the way things have been, the rewards will be enormous. His ultimate objective is to manage his management time.

Getting rid of the monkeys

The manager returns to the office Monday morning just late enough to permit his four subordinates to collect in his outer office waiting to see him about their monkeys. He calls them in, one by one. The purpose of each interview is to take a monkey, place it on the desk between them, and figure out together how the next move might conceivably be the subordinate's. For certain monkeys, this will take some doing. The subordinate's next move may be so elusive that the manager may decide—just for now—merely to let the monkey sleep on the subordinate's back overnight and have him return with it at an



appointed time the next morning to continue the joint quest for a more substantive move by the subordinate. (Monkeys sleep just as soundly overnight on subordinates' backs as on superiors'.)

As each subordinate leaves the office, 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; instead, the manager will be waiting for the subordinate.

Later, as if to remind himself that there is no law against his engaging in a constructive exercise in the interim, the manager strolls by the subordinate's office, sticks his head in the door, and cheerily asks, "How's it coming?" (The time consumed in doing this is discretionary for the manager and boss-imposed for the subordinate.)

When the subordinate (with the monkey on his 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 will no longer have a problem. I cannot help a man who hasn't got a problem.

"When this meeting is over, the problem will leave this office exactly the way it came in—on your back. You may ask my help at any appointed time, and we will make a joint determination of what the next move will 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 at about 11:00 a.m. he realizes that he has no need to shut his door. His monkeys are gone. They will return—but by appointment only. His appointment calendar will assure this.

Transferring the initiative

What we have been driving at in this monkey-on-the-back analogy is to transfer initiative from manager to subordinate and keep it there. We have tried to highlight a truism as obvious as it is subtle.

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

Nor can both manager and 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 prefer to 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; and (5) *act* on own, then routinely report (highest initiative).

Clearly, the manager should be professional enough not to indulge himself 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 content of his boss-imposed or system-imposed time. He thereby forfeits any right to complain about what he is told to do or when he is told to do it. 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 control being at level 5.

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

Care & feeding of monkeys

In order to further clarify our analogy between the monkey-on-the-back and the well-known 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" (violations 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. His subordinates will find time to work as many monkeys as he finds time to feed, but no more. It shouldn't take more than 5 to 15 minutes to feed a properly prepared monkey.

Rule 3

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

Rule 4

Monkeys should be fed face to face or by telephone, but never by mail. (If by mail, the next move will be the manager's—remember?) 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.

sesses the initiative without which he cannot exercise initiative, and then to see to it that this initiative is in fact taken. The third is for him to use another portion of his increased discretionary time to get and keep control of the timing and content of both boss-imposed and system-imposed time.

The result of all this is that the manager will increase his leverage, which will in turn enable him to multiply, without theoretical limit, the value of each hour that he spends in managing management time.

The woods are full of them.

Quoted by Alexander Wilson,
American Ornithology (1808);
preface

Concluding note

"Get control over the timing and content of what you do" is appropriate advice for managing management time. The first order of business is for the manager to enlarge his discretionary time by eliminating subordinate-imposed time. The second is for him to use a portion of his new-found discretionary time to see to it that each of his subordinates pos-