Gotta Minute? Rethinking Our Daily Schedules as Literacy Leaders

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In this reflective piece, Matt shares insights on reclaiming control over daily priorities amidst the constant demands of school leadership. Emphasizing strategies like structuring digital calendars, establishing mutual understandings with assistants, clear communication, and leveraging technology, the article explores proactive approaches to focus on instructional leadership and enhance work-life balance.

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***Image: A clock next to a stack of print materials (DALL-E)***

***I was in a second grade classroom***, observing students and the teacher working on personal narratives, when I got a call from the office. “Matt, a parent is here and would like to speak with you.” I put away my notebook and pen and walked out of the classroom.

Why do we allow others to prioritize our days? It seems like the nonacademic tasks too often take precedence over our most important role as an instructional leader. Daily fires that “need” to be put out can push our essential work as coaches and supervisors to the sidelines. Our smartphones are a constant stream of unanswered emails and text messages. Even when we are in our office, working on something important, our days are consistently filled with “Gotta minute?”s. We don’t want to be rude, so we respond with “Of course…”. The result: A cornucopia of behavior referrals and other paperwork in my messenger bag to take home.

As I transition into a new position, another elementary principalship, I am taking this as an opportunity to hit reset on my daily work life. My goal is to better manage my day so I can spend more time with students and teachers in the classroom. You know, where the learning happens. Next are some strategies I plan to employ this upcoming school year.

* No White Space on the Digital Calendar

This idea comes from Maia Heyck-Merlin, author of *The Together Leader: Get Organized for Your Success - and Sanity!* (Jossey-Bass, 2015). She encourages leaders to make a daily and a weekly schedule of events, similar to a teacher’s lesson plans. If we leave open times, the author contends, others tend to see these as opportunities to pop in and ask general questions or share their frustrations.

My calendar will first be populated with times in which I intend to visit classrooms on a daily basis. Staff meetings and scheduled professional learning community sessions will also be scheduled. I will start with the big rocks. Next will be my available office hours for staff and families that need to see me for whatever reason. If this time is unused, I plan to complete various office tasks and maybe even read professionally (yes, read!). Additionally, my calendar will include the periods of time when I will be visible in the common areas of the school, such as arrival, lunch time, and dismissal. My weekly calendar will be available online and on paper.

* Mutual Understanding with My Assistant

As a school leader, I understand that I have to be available when emergencies arise. But what is a true emergency? In my experience, a parent stopping by to talk about an issue or a question regarding a purchase order can be addressed at a later time. This is why I plan on sitting down with my new assistant and developing a mutual understanding of when I am to be called away from my scheduled list of activities.

My understanding of emergencies includes a student injury on the playground, a major student behavior infraction that needs to be addressed immediately, or an important call from the superintendent or a board member. We will also discuss limiting the use of the public address system to only once or twice a day at scheduled times. I will have my smartphone on me to take calls (set on vibrate). My assistant will have access to my digital calendar so she can schedule appointments for visitors to the office when I am unavailable.

* Clear Communication of Intentions

I am not going to put these plans in action without letting the school know about what I am doing and why. At one of our first staff meetings, I will share my plans and the benefits, especially for them. “Instead of an open-door policy, I will have office hours. You won’t have to guess if I am working on something time-sensitive. Plus, I’ll be in your classrooms with a positive intent more often. I’ll have better relationships with you and our students. I’ll have a stronger understanding of the instructional pulse of the school. How does that sound?” I cannot imagine many teachers not finding this appealing. Clearly communicating this right away should avoid complaints later.

Additionally, I plan on setting parameters about checking email. In the past, my inbox has been the bane of my existence. It was an ever increasing to-do list. My plan is to check email three times a day - morning, noon, and after school - and ensure everyone knows it. Also, I plan on shutting off access to my inbox after 5 P.M. during the week and totally on the weekend. We are parents, spouses and friends as well as literacy leaders. My hope is my work/life balance will become better.

* Leverage Technology When Necessary

Some of the communications that happen during the school day can be handled digitally. Beyond email, I have enjoyed writing a weekly newsletter for faculty and keeping up a school blog with a couple posts per month. Could I merge the two? The new district I am with utilizes Wordpress (www.wordpress.com) for their website. By leveraging the blogging tool within this platform, I could address both sets of stakeholders and increase transparency. Families and community members can be just as aware of my professional intentions as the school staff.

One of the technologies I have used in the past and plan to bring with me is Google Sites. This website creator allows you to create several pages, each with a specific purpose. In the past, I have created pages such as digital data walls for each grade level team, school leadership group agendas and minutes, child study team requests, and how-to videos for learning about using different digital tools. Google apps such as Docs, Sheets, Slides, YouTube videos and Forms can all be embedded within Google Sites.

***I have learned*** that the one thing we have control over during our school day is time. As literacy leaders, we can determine how we want to spend our efforts by prioritizing what’s most important (student learning and teacher engagement), and then allowing secondary tasks to fill in the open spaces. I have to be open to the few emergencies that life will throw my way. Yet if I can designate all of the “Gotta minute?”s to a specific part of my schedule, I believe I can be a better school leader for our building.