



BY DENNIS SPARKS

Focus Attention on High-Impact Activities

Much of our present struggles with our organizations have to do with remembering what is essential and placing it back in the center of our lives.

— David Whyte

“I’M SO overwhelmed that I have no time to really think about what I do,” is a common lament of school leaders, who face unprecedented responsibilities. That’s why it is essential that leaders focus and take disciplined action in a small number of areas they believe will have the greatest impact on teaching, learning, and relationships in schools.

A key to leaders’ success in today’s high-pressure environment is their ability to increase the time they spend on the activities that have the greatest impact by decreasing time spent in areas that make little difference. A helpful tool in making this distinction is the Pareto principle, also known as 80/20 principle, which asserts that a small proportion of leaders’ actions produce a disproportionate share of the results leaders want. In *The 80/20 Principle: The Secret to Success by Achieving More with Less*, Richard Koch says that 80 percent of activities yield only 20 percent of results. The key to finding more time to spend on high-value activities is to eliminate these non-productive activities.

Because leaders who feel overwhelmed typically feel powerless in the face of rising demands, it’s important that they acknowledge that they have discretion to do at least some things differently and recognize that the real enemy is the use of time in unproductive ways. Koch explains it this way: “There is no shortage of time The 80/20 principle says that we should act less. Action drives out thought. . . . It is not the shortage of time that should worry us, but the tendency for the majority of time to be spent in low-quality ways.”

Leaders’ first step is to set aside a few minutes to thoughtfully consider actions that have the greatest impact and those that make little or no difference. Most leaders can quite quickly identify those activities that produce a disproportionate share of the results they most value and those that have little effect. Next, they carve out time for high-quality activities by eliminating one or more less-effective activities. Leaders then practice “**next action thinking**” by making a commitment to high-impact activities on their calendars.

When leaders focus their energy on those activities that make the largest difference and encourage others to do the same, they lead through learning.

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