

Why Your Strategic Work Keeps Getting Pushed to the Evening

THE MANAGER TRACK · EPISODE 340 CLIFF NOTES

The main messages from the episode: why the thinking work slides into the evening, the 2-week stop-doing audit, what to do with each bucket, and how to protect the hours you free up.

01 The core idea

If you work all day but your real work starts at 7 PM, after the meetings, the questions and the fires are done, more time management won't fix it. The question to ask is what you're still doing. The work you were promoted to do, setting direction for your area, keeps losing to work that's louder, closer or more satisfying.

72%
of CEOs' work time went to meetings in a study of 27 CEOs and about 60,000 hours of data

21%
of their time went to strategy

36%
was reactive: issues that came up rather than work they had planned

Source: Michael E. Porter and Nitin Nohria, "How CEOs Manage Time," Harvard Business Review, July to August 2018. Also: in a Gartner survey published April 2026, 47% of managers said more is expected of them and they're working harder than a year ago.

02 Why it happens to capable leaders

THE REASON	WHAT'S GOING ON
1. The loudest demand wins	Porter and Nohria's recommendation: leaders need an explicit personal agenda for their time, or the demands of whoever pushes hardest take over. At every level, whoever asks loudest, sits closest or asked last gets your time.
2. You're holding on to it	Solving the client problem, fixing the document, answering the question nobody else can: that work made you successful, gives you a quick win and makes you feel useful. Strategic work is slow and ambiguous, and nobody sends a thank-you email at the end of it.

EXAMPLE

A senior leader has a clear idea of where her department should go next year and what needs to happen to get there. Her days go to client issues, reviews, approvals and questions from her team. The thinking work starts in the evening, if it starts at all.

> **"Whoever asks the loudest or is most in front of you or asked last ultimately gets your time."**
>
> Ramona Shaw, Episode 340

03 The 2-week stop-doing audit

For 2 weeks, at the end of each day, look at your calendar and your inbox and put every block of time into one of 4 buckets. At the end, add it up. For a lot of leaders, bucket 1 is much smaller than they expected, and bucket 4 is bigger than they'd like to admit.

BUCKET	WHAT GOES IN IT
1. Only I can do this	It needs your judgment, your relationships or your authority. Challenge yourself: leaders sometimes hold on to authority they don't need to carry.
2. Someone else could do this	Maybe with some help: a bit of training, a template or a clear handover.
3. Less often, or not at all	The weekly meeting that could be every other week or half as long. The report nobody reads anymore. The review that could be a quick look instead of a line-by-line edit. A task where AI could do part of the work.
4. I do it because I like it	Or because it makes me feel needed. Be honest here.

Your daily tracker: hours per bucket

DAY	1. ONLY ME	2. SOMEONE ELSE	3. LESS / NOT AT ALL	4. I LIKE IT
Week 1 Mon				
Tue				
Wed				
Thu				
Fri				
Week 2 Mon				
Tue				
Wed				
Thu				
Fri				
Total				

04 What the audit can turn up

EXAMPLE: WHERE ONE LEADER'S WEEK WENT	BUCKET
About a third of his work: reviewing documents his team had already reviewed	3
A status meeting set up 2 years ago, when the team was new, that now repeats what's in the project trackers	3
A few hours of client problems he enjoys solving, which one of his senior people could handle after some training	2 and 4

None of it was wasted work, and all of it felt productive. None of it was work only he could do.

THE TEST FOR EVERY RECURRING MEETING

"If I weren't there, would anything be decided differently?" If the answer is no, you're an audience member. Send someone else, ask for the notes and drop it.

05 What to do with each bucket

Bucket 2: hand off the outcome and the decision rights, not just the task

INSTEAD OF

"Hey, can you prepare the client update?"

SAY THIS

"I'd like you to own the monthly client updates from now on. You decide what goes in. Bring me anything that changes our commitments or the budget. That's the only place I want to be fully involved. Otherwise, it's yours. If you have questions, I'm here to support you."

Expect the first version to be about 80% of what you would have done, and that's fine. It's a stretch assignment. Add check-ins if you need them. Some things need excellence; a lot of things need to be done well and on time.

Bucket 3: cut it or shrink it

The CEOs in Porter and Nohria's study admitted that 1-hour meetings could often be cut to 30 or even 15 minutes. Shorten your recurring meetings, move some to every other week, and drop the ones you're only in out of habit.

Bucket 4: let go of one thing

You don't have to give up everything you enjoy, and you don't need to go cold turkey. Pick one thing, let it go, and notice how it feels. Then keep removing a little more as you take on more of the strategic work.

06 Protect the hours you free up

1 Define what strategic work means in your role

"Do more strategic work" is too vague to start on, and after 5 minutes the inbox wins. Start with 3 questions only you should be answering:

- Where is my area going in the next 12 to 18 months?
- What should we stop doing?
- Who on my team needs to grow, and into what?

2 Give every block a concrete output

A one-page view of where your area should be in a year. A list of 3 things your team should stop doing. A development plan for your 2 strongest people. Something to show makes the time easier to protect and easier to explain to your boss.

3 Put it on the calendar before anything else

Start with 2 blocks of 90 minutes a week (60 if 90 isn't possible yet). Treat them like a client meeting.

WHEN SOMEONE HAS "A QUICK QUESTION"

"I have 2 more minutes, and then I have another commitment."

> **"Strategic time that ends with 'well, I thought about things' will literally be the first block that you cancel."**
>
> Ramona Shaw, Episode 340

07 Tell people what's changing

If you disappear without saying anything, people will test whether you're still available. It's never ill-intended: you were always available, so they assume you still are.

TO YOUR TEAM

"I'm moving the day-to-day approval for vendor contracts to Sam. If something needs me and it's urgent, Sam will bring it to me, but your first go-to person is Sam."

TO YOUR BOSS

"I want to spend more of my time on next year's plan for our region. To do that, I'm handing off the weekly reporting and the vendor approvals. Here's how I'll make sure nothing drops."

OR SIMPLY

"Every Monday and Friday I'll block out 90 minutes to work on strategic projects. If I'm in this room or have this status on, I'm focused on that. If anything is urgent and can't wait 90 minutes, send me a text."

08 When old patterns creep back

The pushback in your own head

"It's just faster if I do it." This week, yes. In 3 months, no.

"My team is at capacity, so I'll do it tonight." Sometimes true, often an untested assumption. Ask. Someone may be waiting for more responsibility, and someone busy on Monday may have room on Thursday.

Signs to watch for, 4 to 6 weeks in

- ☐ People copy you on everything again
- ☐ Decisions wait on you; nobody makes the judgment call
- ☐ Your strategy blocks keep getting moved or cancelled
- ☐ Once a month: review the past 4 weeks, find what crept back in, and hand it off again

Recap

THE MOVE	WHAT TO DO
Run the audit	2 weeks, 4 buckets, every block of your calendar and inbox.
Hand off outcomes	Bucket 2 goes to someone else, with the decision rights. 80% on the first try is fine.
Shrink the meetings	Cut, shorten or move bucket 3. Drop the meetings where you're an audience member.
Let go of one comfort task	One thing from bucket 4. Notice how it feels.
Protect the time	Define your strategic work, put it on the calendar first, tell people what's changing.

09 Try this week

1. **Start the tracker on page 3**
   At the end of each day, sort your calendar and inbox into the 4 buckets. If it feels impossible, try this first: if you had to carve out 5 hours a week, where would they come from?

Keep going

The point of all this is to get your evenings back for your life. The Leadership Accelerator is Archova's 12-week program for new and early-stage managers, including delegating real ownership and shifting your time from doing the work to leading the people who do it.

archova.org/leadership-accelerator **Book a Leadership Strategy Call** **Watch Episode 340**