Executives should worry about strategy, not tasks

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Your senior leadership shouldn't be individual contributors

I was poking around a Facebook thread, and some dude who was senior leadership at a recent job I had made an interesting comment. The picture in question on the thread was a candy jar, about 1/4 full. Apparently it was a "stress candy" jar, and so, being 3/4 depleted, the idea is that the team in question is *really, super stressed*. That's a totally normal thing that can happen in an office, so I thought that made relative sense all things considered. You get down about 6-7 comments and the senior leadership guy is basically jumping in all like, *"I could have used that today! I didn't eat! Looked up from my tasks at 2:30pm and was like Whoa!"*

Now of course, because this guy is senior leadership — i.e. the boss of a bunch of other people on this thread — his comment got about six likes instantly. *"You're such a dragon-slayer, boss!"* Etc, etc. This stuff happens all the time. It's not uncommon.

But … think about the comment he left (which, yes, is paraphrased above) for a second. How does it make any sense at all for senior leadership to be treating their day like that?

Senior leadership and the two-track idea

I've never understood this whole deal, so back when I worked for McKesson for about 12-13 weeks in summer '13, I pitched this concept. It went absolutely nowhere, but here's the idea.

- You have a senior leadership career track. On this track, you will ultimately manage others and departments.
- You have an individual contributor career track. On this track, you never manage others, but you do collaborate with others on projects, etc.
- The trick is that **you can earn the same salary levels on both tracks**

Most companies are terrified of this idea for a number of reasons, notably that it might piss off conventional senior leadership — *"You mean I gotta manage 15 schlubs, and Johnny's making the same just working solo?!?!"* — and for a whole host of other reasons around how we look at salary and compensation, which is funny as hell [because no one really understands salary anyway](#), including often the people who set the bands.

[What if we changed the whole way we thought about promoting people into senior leadership?](#)

Anyway, this idea bombed.

But here's why I liked it: there are many, many, many people in the world who should *never* be a manager of others. Being a manager of others means you'll have some control over their workflow — and, honestly, some control over how they feel about their lives at the end of a day/week. [Some people should never have that responsibility.](#) But oftentimes, people go get it — try to become senior leadership — because it's the only way to make more money.

When you combine that with Peter Principle with people getting complacent in jobs, you explain this stat: [82 percent of managers end up being the wrong hire.](#) That's a massive failure rate — 8 in 10, or 4 in 5 — and yet, no one gives two shits so long as the revenue's still there. How we treat the 'human' side of business and management and leadership is a complete and total joke that not even Seinfeld in his heyday could riff properly on. (Should I have used a Kevin Hart reference there?)

But aside from [ass-clown target-chasers as managers](#), why else would two tracks make sense?

Senior leadership and priorities

This is my absolute No. 1 pet peeve about how most organizations are structured, and lest you think this is me going on a rant about senior leadership at different places I've worked — it's not. This stuff about [complete lack of priority is backed up by research.](#)

Take the senior leadership example from above, i.e. the Facebook post. If that dude really didn't even look up from his desk until 2:30pm, knowing him (a little bit) and knowing general notions of senior leadership, I'd assume you're mostly talking about meetings, calls, and task work. [All that stuff is shallow work.](#) Some of the meetings/calls may have advanced a revenue agenda, of course — but predominantly it's just Column A to Column B, checking boxes, logistical bullshit.

Now, this is necessary at many jobs — but why is senior leadership doing this stuff?

This is where most jobs collapse for me: there are typically two things a job needs to theoretically 'align' in terms of the right stuff getting done in a given day, week, month, or year.

Ready?

- Strategy (the big picture)
- Execution (the day-to-day tasks)

The first bullet, strategy, should be the domain of senior leadership. In the crassest terms possible, they make the most money — so they should do that work. And if it tanks big-time over

a strategic plan period, their asses should be on the line.

The second bullet, execution, should be the domain of rank-and-file up to middle managers. That's the actual work, both shallow and deep, of how an org works day-to-day.

A bunch of consultants like to rush in and screech that "Everyone is a leader in successful orgs!" Yes, that's nice. It's also a utopia. Most people in an office have some degree of leadership potential, [but hierarchy usually totally squashes that out of people within the first three weeks.](#) *"The top dogs know what's best!"*

But wait … the top dogs? The senior leadership? The same people doing task work from 9am-2:30pm without a break? They know what's best?

Huh?

There are a number of tremendously-fraught things here, so let's run down a few quickly:

Senior leadership work is furthest away from the customer: Companies are set up so that rank-and-file workers interact more with customers/clients, and senior leadership works more with partners and potential perks. So all this task work? It's probably not even that related to the people who buy the stuff that drives the revenue.

Senior leadership has a totally different set of priorities than even their direct reports: Usually their only metric of concern is growth or revenue. People that report directly to them are being told they have eighteen additional concerns — usually all stuff senior leadership is kicking down the ladder — but 17 of those can't get attention from the boss because the boss needs to talk money, money, money.

Senior leadership can't set strategy and get down in the weeds on its execution: That's the same general principle as an editor pitching a story for a magazine then going and writing it himself, then editing it himself. It just *can't* work that way. This is the real deal: senior leadership *should* be about setting the strategy and [coaching people towards it](#), but because senior leadership also mostly fears incompetence ([backed by research](#)) and want to be seen as relevant ([ditto](#)), they often want to do both.

And therein we have the *"Hitting targets until 2:30pm!"* post from above. But there is a better way.

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Strip the task work from 'em. That's it. Out-source it, give 'em assistants, whatever. Strip the meetings and calls from 'em too, unless those are directly aligned with their metrics for the year. Their goal should be to set strategy, define how the strategy plays out, and then go around coaching, guiding, and re-contextualizing the work. That's it.

Senior leadership can have a set of specific metrics, probably around money, and the goal is to

hit those while also making those under you better — both your direct reports and theirs. Give a crap, for a second, about ['talent strategy.'](#) Think about whether you might be disrupted and discuss ['change management.'](#) Walk around and talk to people about the business, about pain points, etc.

> [Walk around and give a crap about people instead of just numbers. It might just work as a…](#)

See, at the senior leadership level, you're already making the most scratch. (Check.) Because of how most people view and conceptualize hierarchy, you've already got the most respect. (Check.) You're usually closest to the perks provided by your company's partners and vendors, who want to woo you to get more business. (Check.) So you're firing on all cylinders.

Instead of getting down in the dirt and line-editing Google Drive documents or blog headlines, why don't you use your senior leadership perch to pay it forward a bit and help others grow and align with the overall strategy/vision?

I realize it's a utopia at many places, but damn.

Your thoughts?

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