

THE MANAGER'S WEEK · CHAPTER ONE

A Week Nobody Planned

A manager's week is mostly written by other people, and the first gain is in reading it back.

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Chapter One of The Manager's Week. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/the-managers-week (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989102).

A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

A manager's week is mostly written by other people, and the first gain is in reading it back. It is twenty to seven on a Friday, and the director of a regional operations division is the last person on her floor. She has opened her calendar to write the weekly note to her own manager, and she is scrolling backwards through the week to remember what happened in it. Monday has eleven entries. Tuesday has nine, two of them overlapping. Wednesday was meant to begin with a clear morning for the network plan, the one document her chief executive has asked her for twice, and the morning is now a supplier call, a recruitment panel and something titled quick sync that lasted an hour. The plan is open in another window. It is at page two, where it was last Friday.

CHAPTER ONE

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Twenty to seven, Friday

It is twenty to seven on a Friday, and the director of a regional operations division is the last person on her floor. She has opened her calendar to write the weekly note to her own manager, and she is scrolling backwards through the week to remember what happened in it. Monday has eleven entries. Tuesday has nine, two of them overlapping. Wednesday was meant to begin with a clear morning for the network plan, the one document her chief executive has asked her for twice, and the morning is now a supplier call, a recruitment panel and something titled *quick sync* that lasted an hour. The plan is open in another window. It is at page two, where it was last Friday.

There is a mug beside the keyboard with an inch of cold tea in it, and the cleaner's trolley is somewhere down the corridor. Her shoulders are up near her ears, and they have been there, she realises, since about Tuesday lunchtime. She is good at her job. Everyone in the week's forty-one meetings would say so. And she cannot, looking at the screen, find the hour in which she did the thing she is paid most to do.

She is a composite, drawn from the way these evenings are described in the research below and in the house's own practice, and no firm is meant. Anyone who has run a team of any size has had her Friday.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's canon has a sentence for what her shoulders are doing, and it comes from a book about the body's relationship with time rather than a management text, which is part of why it lands:

> *Linear time, untempered by somatic awareness, produces a particular kind of suffering that is so pervasive in modern life that we have almost stopped recognizing it as suffering. We simply call it "being busy."*

This chapter makes one claim. A manager's week is mostly written by other people, and the gain in it is not found by working longer or by a better system for lists. It is found by reading the week back: seeing who asked for each hour, and how many of those hours held work that only she could have done. The calendar is the first place a leader's capacity is spent, and because it is spent before anyone has decided how, it is also the cheapest place to begin.

Five executives, one week each

The modern study of what managers do begins with a doctoral student who decided to watch. In the late 1960s Henry Mintzberg followed five chief executives, one week each, and recorded everything: every letter and memo, every call, every meeting, who started it, how long it lasted and what it was about. He published the analysis in *Management Science* in 1971 and the book, *The Nature of Managerial Work*, in 1973.[2]

What he found contradicted the picture of the manager that the textbooks of the time carried, the planner at a clear desk who organises, coordinates and controls. The managers he watched worked, as his 1971 abstract puts it, "at an unrelenting pace," and their work was "characterized by variety, discontinuity and

brevity." Activities were short and constantly interrupted; later summaries of the book give the median time spent on any one issue as about nine minutes. The managers preferred, he wrote, issues "that are current, specific, and ad hoc," presented in conversation rather than on paper. And the conclusion he drew from it was blunt for a journal devoted to the science of management: "there is virtually no science in managerial work."

He also proposed an account of why the work looked like that, and it is kinder to managers than the word *fragmented* suggests. The managers he watched, his abstract says, performed ten roles in three groups: interpersonal, as figurehead, liaison and leader; informational, as "the nerve center" of the organisation's information system; and decisional, at the heart of how resources were allocated and disturbances handled. A nerve centre is interrupted because that is what it is for. The brevity was not a failure of discipline. It was what a position looks like when every part of an organisation routes its questions through one person.

That reading matters, because it moves the problem from the manager's character to the shape of the position. A director whose week is broken into nine-minute pieces may be disorganised. She may also be the only point at which several streams of work meet, and the pieces are the streams arriving.

A word on the strength of this evidence. Five people, each for one week, is a small and a particular sample: chief executives of American organisations in the late 1960s, observed by one researcher. Mintzberg knew it, and leaned on the earlier diary studies for support, among them Sune Carlson's study of Swedish managing directors in 1951 and Rosemary Stewart's diaries of British managers in the 1960s. A review of the evidence by Colin Hales in 1986 found the broad pattern held across many later studies, while warning that much of it described what managers did rather than what made them effective.[3] And in 2006 Stefan Tengblad repeated Mintzberg's method with a new set of top executives and found some of it had changed.[4] The workload was much larger, more of the contact was with subordinates in groups, and, most interesting of all, "fragmentation of time" was "not as prevalent in the new study." The pattern Mintzberg saw is common. It is not a law of nature.

That last finding is the one the director at twenty to seven should hear first. If fragmentation were the essence of the job, nothing could be done about her Wednesday. Tengblad's executives suggest it is at least partly a habit of a place and a period, which means it can be read, and changed.

Santa Anna's canon has a line on why the habit is so hard to see from inside. The body, it says, has its own sense of pace, and "It knows the difference between productive urgency and anxious rushing." The difficulty is that a week of forty-one meetings produces both, and from the inside they feel the same.



A thousand diaries

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A thousand diaries

For forty years after Mintzberg, studies of managerial time remained mostly small and observational, because watching an executive for a week is expensive and few will allow it. In 2020 four economists, Oriana Bandiera, Andrea Prat, Stephen Hansen and Raffaella Sadun, published a study that changed the scale.[5] They built a method for collecting the week of a chief executive through daily calls with an assistant, hour by hour, recording each activity's length, who was in it and what it was for. They applied it to 1,114 chief executives in six countries.

The diaries sorted, with the help of a machine-learning algorithm, into two broad types. One type the authors called "leaders": chief executives whose weeks held more multifunction, high-level meetings, with people from several parts of the business in the room. The other they called "managers": chief executives whose weeks held more individual meetings with the core functions, one area at a time. The firms that hired the first type performed better. It took about three years after a new chief executive arrived for the

difference to show. And the authors' structural estimates suggested something more careful than *leaders are better*. The productivity differences, they wrote, were due "to mismatches rather than to leaders being better for all firms." Some firms needed one kind of week and got the other.

It is worth being precise about what this shows. It is an association between how a chief executive spends her time and how her firm performs, in a large and carefully collected sample, with the authors' modelling to separate cause from selection. It does not show that any particular calendar will lift any particular firm. But it does establish, at scale, the thing Mintzberg could only suggest: that where a leader's hours go is not noise around the real work. It is a measurable choice, it differs between people in the same role, and it is tied to results.

Read the director's Wednesday against it. The network plan is the one piece of work in her week that needs the whole division in view at once, the very kind of cross-functional thinking the study's "leaders" did in their meetings. Her week is full of the other kind, one function at a time, one supplier, one vacancy, one quick sync. None of those meetings was a mistake. Most were somebody else's urgent item. The question the study raises is whether, added together, they are the week her division needs.

Santa Anna's canon describes one reason weeks fill this way, and it is not the one leaders expect. Writing about how organisations hold their resources, it describes gatekeeping, the habit of controlling access, as a source of comfort rather than strategy: "The person who controls the budget, the calendar, the information flow, the approval process, experiences each act of gatekeeping as a micro-dose of safety." A manager whose approval is needed for a great deal is, by that arrangement, a manager whose week belongs to everyone who needs it. The canon is clear that nobody chooses this out of vanity. "This is not malice. It is survival behavior wearing a business suit."

The engineers' mornings

If the cost of a fragmented week fell only on the manager, it would be her problem and her diary's. It does not. In the late 1990s the organisational scholar Leslie Perlow spent nine months with a team of software engineers and published what she found under a title that has passed into ordinary use: *The Time Famine*.[6] The engineers felt they had too much to do and not enough time to do it. They had difficulty getting their own work done, the abstract reports, "because they were constantly interrupted by others." A crisis mentality and a reward system built on individual heroics kept the interruptions going, since the engineer who dropped everything to rescue a colleague was the one who was praised.

Then Perlow and the team changed how the group used its time. The abstract records the result plainly: "Altering the way software engineers used their time at work, however, enhanced their collective productivity." The study is one team in one firm, observed closely, and its strength is in the depth of the observation rather than in any figure that could be carried to another firm. What it shows is the mechanism.

Time at work is not owned by each person separately. It is a shared resource, and each interruption moves a cost from the person who interrupts to the person interrupted.

A manager sits at the centre of exactly that exchange, in both directions. Her own week is broken into pieces by the people who need her. And each of those pieces, seen from the other side, is somebody's work waiting for an answer. The recruitment panel was waiting for her availability. The supplier call had been moved twice. The quick sync existed because a question from above had reached two of her team, and they could not settle it without her. *The Margin*, another of the house's books, reads [the attention every team spends and nobody budgets](https://hautelumiere.life/editions/rsd-master-rsd-in-acedemia-final-manuscriptt/page/), and why fewer windows, kept well, serve a team better than many, kept badly. A manager's calendar is where that budget is set, usually without anyone noticing that a budget exists. The canon's advice to a creative team could have been written for Perlow's engineers, and it treats the whole group's time as one thing to be defended: "Protect collective air fiercely. Block unstructured time in the group calendar and defend it against the constant pressure to fill it with meetings."

There is a second cost, quieter than the first. The more of her week a manager spends answering, the less of it she spends on the decisions only she can take, and those decisions wait. A network plan at page two for a fortnight is not only her lost Wednesday. It is three teams who cannot plan their spring because the plan they are waiting for has not been written. How many people a single week of hers is asked to hold, and what happens when the number grows past what a week can carry, is the subject of Chapter 2, and it is a question of arithmetic before it is a question of character.

Who wrote the week

The director has a habit that most managers share. When she reviews a week, she asks what she did. It is a reasonable question, and it produces a list. A more useful question is who wrote each hour.

Mintzberg recorded exactly this for his five executives: for every contact, who initiated it. The pattern he found has become one of the best-known findings in the field, though the precise proportions vary from study to study and are best not repeated without the book open. The general shape is that a large share of a senior manager's contacts were started by other people. What that suggests, and it is this book's reading rather than a finding of the study, is that control over a manager's week is less a matter of having fewer interruptions than of having decided in advance which ones to take.

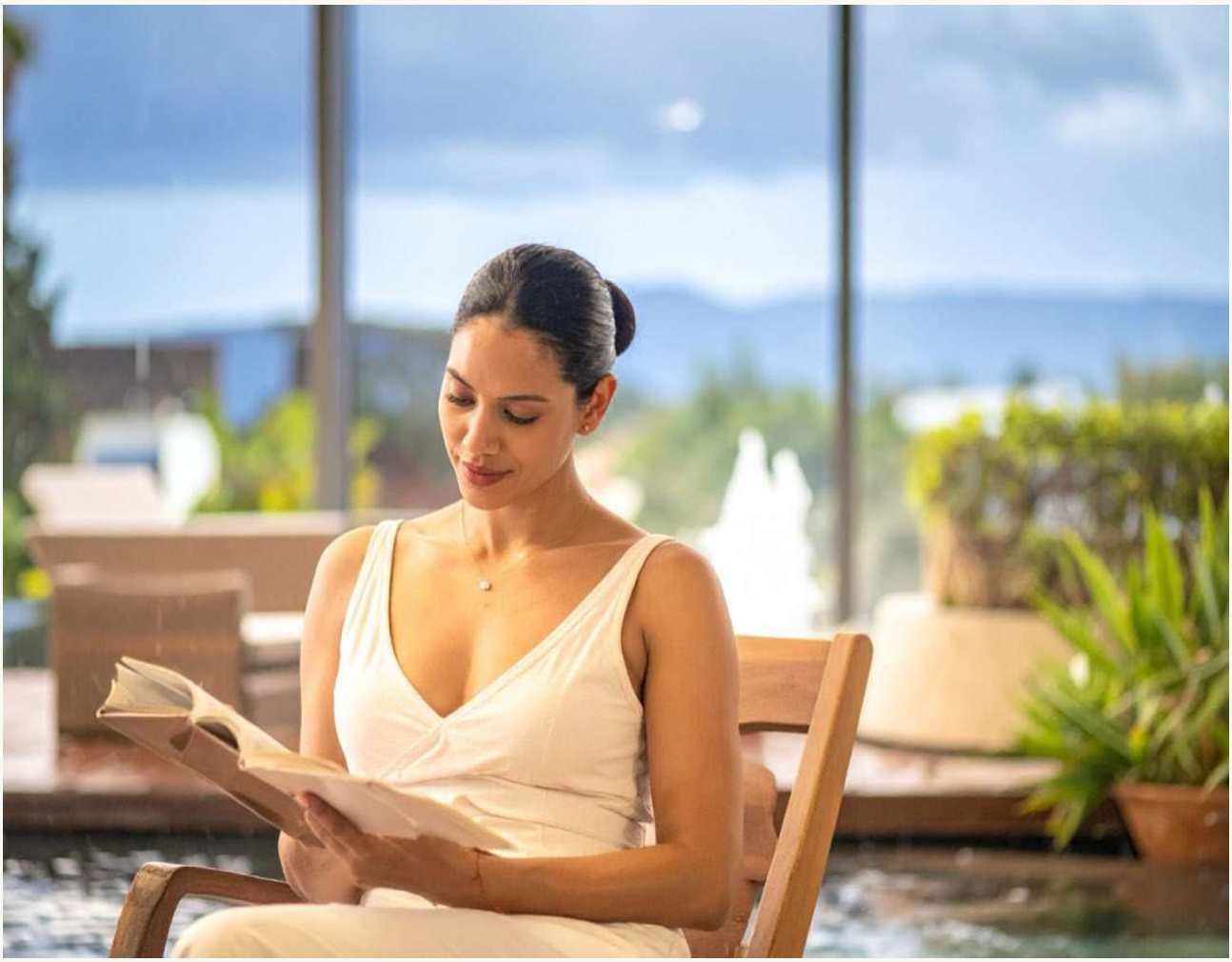
One author of her week deserves a sentence of his own, because managers rarely count him. The director's own manager wrote four of Wednesday's hours without meaning to: a request for figures by noon, which became an hour of her team's time and half an hour of hers; a forwarded email marked *thoughts?*; and the quick sync, which began as his question to two of her people. None of it was unreasonable. All of it was invisible to him, because from where he sat each request took a minute. A week is written from above as well

as from below, and the hours written from above are the hardest to decline, which is why a diary that records them is a gift to both people.

That distinction changes how a week reads. An hour asked for by a customer whose contract is at risk, an hour asked for by a new hire who is stuck, and an hour asked for by a colleague who wants a decision she could take herself all look the same in a calendar. They are not the same. The first is the job. The second is the job too, and probably the best hour of the week. The third is a question that belongs somewhere else, and answering it teaches the colleague to bring the next one, which is the subject of Chapter 4.

The canon's book on creative work has a line that could be pinned above any manager's calendar, and it is not sentimental about it: "We live in a culture that has declared war on spaciousness." The same chapter is practical about what can be done without pretending a leader can withdraw from her organisation: "The practical challenge is real: most of us cannot simply clear our calendars. But even small pockets of temporal air make a difference." It is a modest claim, which is why it is credible. Nobody is asking the director to cancel the week. The question is whether two of its forty-one blocks can be moved to hold the work only she can do.

It helps to say what that work usually is, because managers often answer the question too narrowly. It is rarely a task. It is the thinking that needs the whole of her area in view, of the kind the study's "leaders" did in their meetings; the conversations that only her position can hold, with her own manager, with a peer whose team is the other half of a problem, with a person on her team who is ready for something larger; and the decisions that cannot be taken by anyone below her because they change what the people below her are asked to do. Most of that work does not appear in a calendar as an appointment, because nobody else asked for it. That is exactly why the calendar loses it.



The week read back

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The week read back

Picture the same director the following Monday, having decided to do one thing differently. She does not buy a system. She keeps a diary.

For one ordinary week she writes down, at the end of each block of the day, what the last hour or so actually held. Not what the calendar said; what happened. Beside each entry she makes three small marks. Who asked for it: herself, her team, her own manager, a peer, someone outside. Could anyone else have done it, and who. And did it move the network plan, or the two or three other things she has said in writing this quarter are hers. It takes a few minutes a day, done at the end of each block rather than reconstructed on Friday, because a week remembered on Friday is the week she wishes she had had.

On the following Friday she reads it back. The figures are her own and would not be anyone else's, but the shape is common. Most of the hours were asked for by other people. A good number could have been done

by someone on her team, often someone who would have learned from it. Two standing meetings, held every week for a year, had not changed a decision since the summer. And the hours that moved the plan were few, and scattered, a twenty-minute gap here and there, never long enough to think in.

What she does next is small, and the order matters more than the size. She tells her team what she found, briefly, and that she is going to keep two mornings a week for the plan and for the work only her role can do, and when she will be reachable instead. She asks one of her managers to take the supplier call from now on, with authority to decide, because the diary showed that her presence added nothing the manager could not. She proposes ending one of the two standing meetings and changing the other to a fortnightly one with a written note between. And she leaves the recruitment panel exactly where it is, because the diary showed it was some of the most important time in the week: choosing who joins is work only she can sign.

Chapter 7 carries the diary page, the marks, the reading-back and the order of the first changes, and Chapter 6 places them at the start of a first ninety days. What can be said here is where the practice most often goes wrong. A manager who keeps the diary for a day instead of a week records her best day. A manager who protects her mornings without telling her team when she is reachable has simply moved the interruptions to the afternoon and added a grievance to them. And a manager who reads the week back looking for hours to cut, rather than for whose hours they were, will cut the conversations that were the job.

There is a gain here, and it is worth naming in the terms an organisation can count, because the chapters that follow return to it. The most expensive hours in most teams are its manager's, and some of them are spent on work that a colleague could have done and learned from. The decisions only the manager can take are delayed by the same fragmentation, and every day of delay is borne by the people waiting. Both can be seen in records a firm already keeps: in calendars, in the dates on which decisions are taken, in how long a team waits for an approval. How such a gain is measured honestly enough that both the manager and the organisation would sign the number is the question of Chapter 5, and it has an old and practical answer. The house has spent a whole book, *Where the Flow Stops*, on how a measure is agreed before anyone knows what it will say.

None of this guarantees that the plan is written. Some weeks are rightly lost to a crisis, and a manager who protects her mornings from a genuine emergency has mistaken the practice for a rule. The gain is not that the week becomes quiet. It is that the week becomes chosen, and that the person whose time is most expensive knows, for the first time in a while, where it went.

Keeping the diary, in practice

The article this chapter began as ended on a Friday a month later. The book can go further, into the finer points a manager meets when she tries this in her own week, and the first of them is choosing the week.

The week should be ordinary. Not the week of the board meeting, not the week after a holiday, not the week of a crisis. A manager who keeps the diary in an unusual week will spend the reading-back explaining why it was unusual, and will learn nothing she can change. If every week feels unusual, that is itself the finding, and the diary should be kept anyway, with a line at the top saying so.

The second point is the size of the block. Mintzberg recorded every contact, which a researcher can do and a manager cannot. A quarter of an hour is fine enough to show fragmentation and coarse enough to keep. The entry is written at the end of each block or each meeting, in a few words, and the three marks are added at the same moment: who asked for it, who else could have done it, and whether it moved one of the two or three things the manager has said in writing are hers this quarter. Entries made at the end of the day are already a story. Entries made on Friday are a wish.

The third is honesty about the work that does not appear in a calendar. Much of a manager's week is spent in conversations nobody booked: the question at the coffee machine, the message answered on the way to a meeting, the twenty minutes after a meeting spent with one person who stayed behind. Kotter's general managers were notable for exactly these short, unplanned exchanges, and they are often the most useful part of a manager's week.[7] The diary records them as blocks like any other, because a week read back without them looks emptier and more controllable than it was.

The fourth is how to read it. The manager sorts the blocks, on Friday, in three ways. By who asked: herself, her team, her own manager, peers, outside. By whether someone else could have done it, and if so whether that person would have learned from it. And by whether it moved her own few priorities. Most managers find three things, in varying proportions. A large share of the week was asked for by other people, which is ordinary and often right. A noticeable share could have been done by someone else, and some of that was work the other person would have grown by doing. And the hours that moved her own priorities were few and scattered, never long enough to think in.

The fifth is the order of the first changes, and it matters more than any of them. The first change is to tell the team, in a sentence, what the diary showed and what she is going to do about it, so that what follows is not experienced as withdrawal. The second is to protect a small number of longer blocks for the work only she can do, two mornings or three, and to say when she is reachable instead. The third is to hand one recurring piece of work to a named person, with the authority to decide, because the diary showed that her presence added little. The fourth is to look hard at the standing meetings, which are the easiest blocks to change and the ones most often left alone. Chapter 7 carries the diary page and the reading sheet, and Chapter 6 places the week in the first ten days of a ninety-day plan, before anything else changes.

There are three mistakes worth naming. The first is to treat the diary as a time-management exercise and look for blocks to cut. The point is to see whose hours they were and what the position is being asked to carry, which is a question about the organisation as much as about the manager. The second is to protect mornings without the team's agreement, which moves the interruptions to the afternoon and adds resent-

ment to them. The third, and the most common, is to keep the diary once. A week read back is a photograph. Kept again for one week each quarter, it becomes a record against which the manager, and later the organisation, can see whether anything has moved.

And there is one decision that changes the result more than any other. It is whether the manager shows the reading-back to her own manager. A diary kept privately changes one person's week. A diary shared upward, with the hours her manager wrote highlighted without complaint, changes two, and it is the beginning of the conversation about what the position is for.

Twenty to seven, a month later

It is twenty to seven on a Friday, and the director is not the last person on her floor; one of her managers is finishing the supplier summary he now writes himself. The calendar has thirty-two entries this week. Two of them are mornings with a single word in them, *plan*, and on one of the two she was interrupted, because a site lost power, and she went.

The network plan is open in the other window. It is at page nine, and it has a date on it for the chief executive. The mug beside the keyboard is empty, and she does not remember making the tea.

She writes the weekly note in ten minutes, because for once she knows what the week held, and closes the laptop.

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A Week Nobody Planned

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