

## /var/log/manager How Technical Managers Tell Time

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**T**ime management for sysadmins is a largely solved equation thanks to Mr. Limoncelli [1]. I would like to offer a humble extension to his work and talk about time management for the technical manager.

### Normal and Interrupt for the Sysadmin

The sysadmin has recurring tasks. Flush logs. Check backups. Monitor loads. Look up *Simpsons* quotes to use in the next change control meeting. Answer email from the manager. Probably in that order. Managers know they rate below looking up pop culture references.

The sysadmin has interrupt-driven tasks that trump all the recurring, normal tasks. The prioritization is now whatever the interrupt signal is. The datacenter is on fire. The SAN just crashed. The boss's printer is out of paper. The public-facing e-commerce site certificate expired. You know, the critical break-fix things that are instantly more important than anything that may have been planned out in advance.

### Normal and Interrupt for the Technical Manager

The technical manager has recurring tasks. Read and answer email. Listen to and answer voice mail. Check and update calendars. Attend scheduled meetings. Meet weekly deadlines like time card queues. Prepare reports and briefings. Take any administrative actions required, like approving expenses, denying training requests (don't be disappointed, you may resubmit again in 30 days for further denial!), and responding to requests for information from the VP.

The technical manager has interrupt-driven events that just move the recurring tasks to later in the day. The VP overheard something in the board meeting and wants an explanation. Another VP wants to talk about his golf swing and you're the first person he sees. Another manager wants to complain about your people doing something wrong. A customer wants to know when a project will be delivered, with a full review of schedule, today. HR has to have a meeting immediately to discuss a complaint someone filed. An employee is in a bind and needs top-cover.

### Taking Control of the Manager's Information Flow

It's all true, and it all has to get done. There are some practical tips and tricks I can offer to help a busy technical manager never forget a promise (or a threat) and always have the right answers. There are two things you need above everything else, even above a vacation where you take your laptop and work anyway: discipline and a system. I'm going to tell you about my system.

First, you have to baseline. Understand your own inputs. For me, my inputs span multiple inject points that I cannot coalesce any further for a variety of reasons:

1. Multiple calendars
2. Multiple inboxes
3. Two telephones with voice mail
4. Drive-by tasks and requests for information from my peers and leadership
5. Drive-by information updates and status reports from my team
6. Drive-by requests for close air support when one of my team needs me to help them
7. Scheduled meetings
8. Unscheduled meetings
9. The hallway, which is where a surprising amount of coordination seems to get done

My durable repositories of information:

1. My active inboxes
2. My email archives
3. SharePoint portal “wiki” file
4. My analog, handwritten, completely illegible notebook

After you’ve articulated what your inputs and repositories are, you need to have a system for processing flow. My system owes a debt to the Getting Things Done approach [2].

First, own your inbox and make it work for you. Create at least seven folders in your inbox. Label them Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Sooner, and Later. By the end of every day, do this “Four-D” process on everything in your inbox: If you can “do” it, do it on the spot. If you can “delegate” it, make it an assignment for someone else and CC yourself, then file the message in a future day’s folder for follow-up. If you can or must wait on something, “defer” it by filing it in the appropriate day’s folder and worry about it then. If it can’t be done, delegated, or deferred, then just “delete” it. In my case, I delete to an archive for future reference. At the start of each day, process all the items in the “sooner” folder and all the items in that day’s box. On Friday, review everything in the “later” folder. Doing this every day, you never lose email, you never miss something important. You never miss anything.

Second, ignore your telephone and practice the concept of “one conversation at a time,” which is a lesson of the “Fierce Conversations” school of thought [3]. If you are talking to a live person who took the time to walk to your desk, give that person your attention and don’t even look to see who is calling on the telephone. If a second person comes to talk to you while you’re talking to the first, don’t put the first person in sleep status to

process the new interrupt first. Finish the first conversation and move to the second. Check voice messages several times per day and return calls, and in general treat the telephone like it’s just a voice-activated email system. Don’t work for your telephone, make it work for you.

Third, keep a running tab on everything you have to do, that you’ve asked others to do, and that you want to track. Carry a notebook and write things down. If you don’t have a notebook, write things down on your hand (I’m well-known for my “palm pilot” that has a tendency to reboot when I wash my hands). Don’t trust your brain. Move everything from your notebook (or hand) to your wiki. The wiki should be something only you see, and should lay out the same way as your email inbox folders, but with more range. Days of the week, sooner and later, but also months and years out. Keep track of ideas you have that might be worth exploring next year. Take special note of anything you have to do in the morning to prevent getting fired. Consult and update this wiki when you start your day and when you end it, so you know what you’ve done and what you have to do next, while never losing sight of what your long-term issues are.

Finally, understand your own priorities. My priorities are, in order: people on my team, my customers, my managers, human resources and finance, other people in my organization, and external entities like vendors. My golden rule: if one of my own people needs me, they are my priority. Their job is sysadmin. My job is taking care of them.

### Using the System

I’ve been using this system for three years with great success, and I’m pleased to share it with you. My goal is to understand the things that are really important and to be able to absorb and process all the relevant information flows in my organization. In the modern digital age, information is both faster and has more volume than the average person can handle. A reliable system is like a fulcrum, it helps me to lift more than I’m actually capable of doing. This system helps me to understand what’s important and to focus where my efforts matter most, which is usually in support of my team. I’m the manager, and this is how I do my job.

[1] T. Limoncelli, *Time Management for System Administrators*, O’Reilly Media, 2005.

[2] D. Allen, *Getting Things Done*, Penguin, 2002.

[3] S. Scott, *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life One Conversation at a Time*, The Berkley Publishing Group, 2002.