

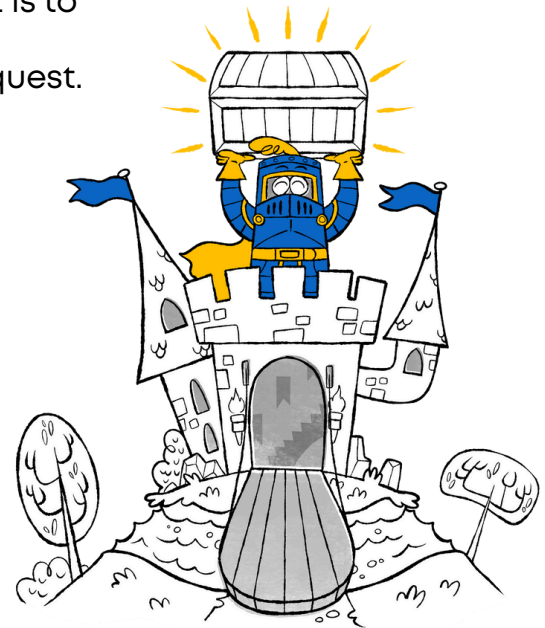
WHAT MATTERS MOST

Conversation Guide for Managers

1 FOCUS ON OUTCOMES, NOT OUTPUTS

Start by helping your team understand the difference between being busy, being productive, and being effective. The secret is to differentiate between activities, outputs, and outcomes. The outcome you're trying to achieve can be thought of as your quest.

Term	Description	Example
1. Activities	The things you do. The throughputs of work.	Research a prospect, build a spreadsheet, or attend a meeting
2. Outputs	The things you deliver. The finished work products.	Deliver a proposal, send a report, or give a presentation
3. Outcomes	The changes you create in the world. The results or impact.	A signed contract, high customer engagement, or low turnover



As a manager, if you:

- Focus on **activities** → your team is more likely to become **busy**.
- Focus on **outputs** → your team is more likely to become **productive**.
- Focus on **outcomes** → your team is more likely to become **effective**.

It's easy to get stuck focusing on activity and feeling good about how hard your team is working. And even more tempting to feel confident if they are pumping out work and being highly productive. But productivity that doesn't generate outcomes is wasted effort.

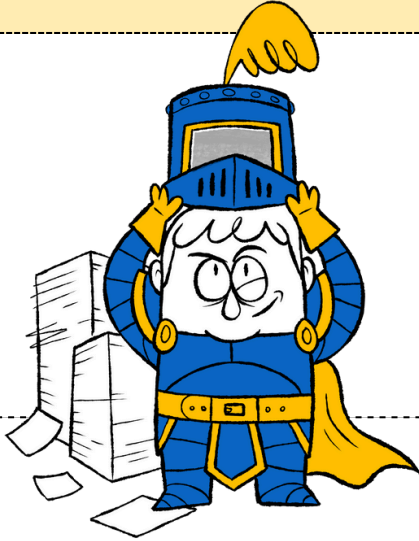
Focusing on outcomes allows you to identify the outputs and activities that are effective and to reduce your team's investment in those that are not.

Talk with Your Team

- What percentage of your time goes to activities that drive the most meaningful outcomes for our organization?
- What would change if we aligned our attention and energy around outcomes instead of tasks?

Talk with Individuals

- Share one **outcome** that you believe is the priority for the person right now.
- Which **outputs** will drive that outcome? (Coach them to put them in priority order)
- Which outputs that are currently taking their time and energy should be deprioritized? (Coach them toward a plan on how to reduce or eliminate the investment in these outputs.)
- Which **activities** will deliver the priority outputs?
- Which activities should they deprioritize. Provide any support they require to shift how they are spending their time.



Priority Outcome:

Priority Outputs
(in numbered order)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Outputs to Deprioritize

Most Impactful Activities

Activities to Deprioritize

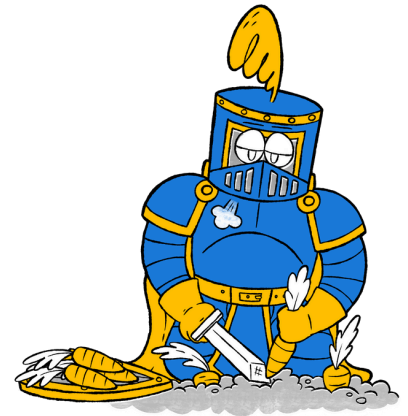
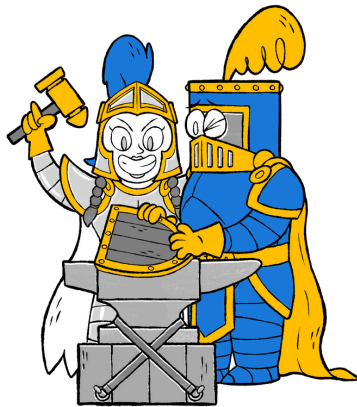
2 MAKE THREE LISTS, NOT ONE

The first exercise helps you focus your team on the most important outcomes for their own roles. While that's their most important quest, being a part of an organization means there are other responsibilities as well.

In addition to their own quests, each person also has work to do to support other people's quests and to do the side quests that are part of being a good organizational citizen.

If all of the activities associated with these three objectives are added to one long list, it will be difficult for people to prioritize. Rather than doing the most important or urgent tasks first, they might be tempted to do the one that just popped into their inbox, or the one associated with the scariest person, or the one that feels easiest.

Shift from a single to-do list with too many priorities to a tiered framework that separates focus areas and helps allocate time intentionally.



The Three Lists

1. **My Quest** – The activities associated with the high-value, high-impact outcomes you are directly responsible for achieving.
2. **Others' Quests** – The activities that support others in achieving their key outcomes.
3. **Side Quests** – The activities that are necessary for maintenance and administration.

Each of the three lists should be numbered by priority, not just a collection of items

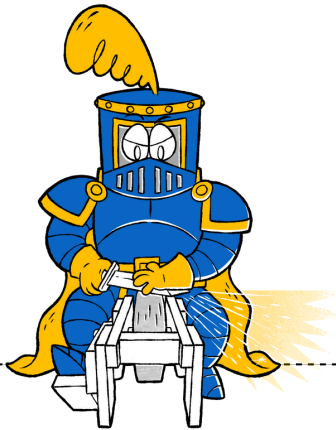
Talk with Your Team

- What's your main quest right now? How do your other tasks support or distract from it?
- Which 'quests' are crowding your calendar but aren't central to the impact you want to have?
- Where are you being pulled into to support other teams? Let's talk about whether that's the optimal use of your time.
- What else is taking your time and energy that I should know about?

Talk with Individuals - Ask your team members to compile their three lists and share them with you.

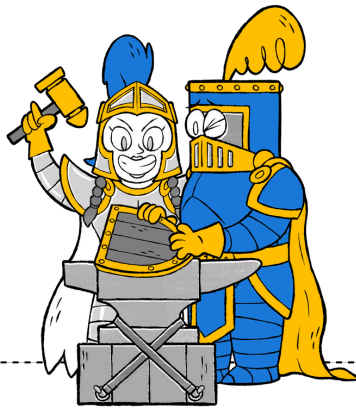
- Tell me about what made the list and why you chose the order you did?
- What things didn't make the list? Take me through your thinking around prioritization.
- What are the most important contributions you're making to other people's outcomes?
- Are there any requests for your time that don't feel like a priority? How can I help you manage those demands?
- What's on your side quest list for this week?

Encourage team members to revisit their lists weekly. Use these lists in 1:1s to check alignment and reduce overwhelm.



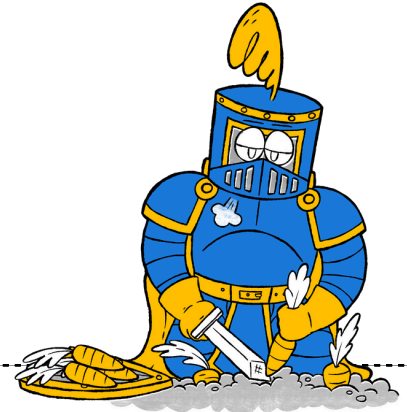
My Quest

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



Others' Quests

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



Side Quests

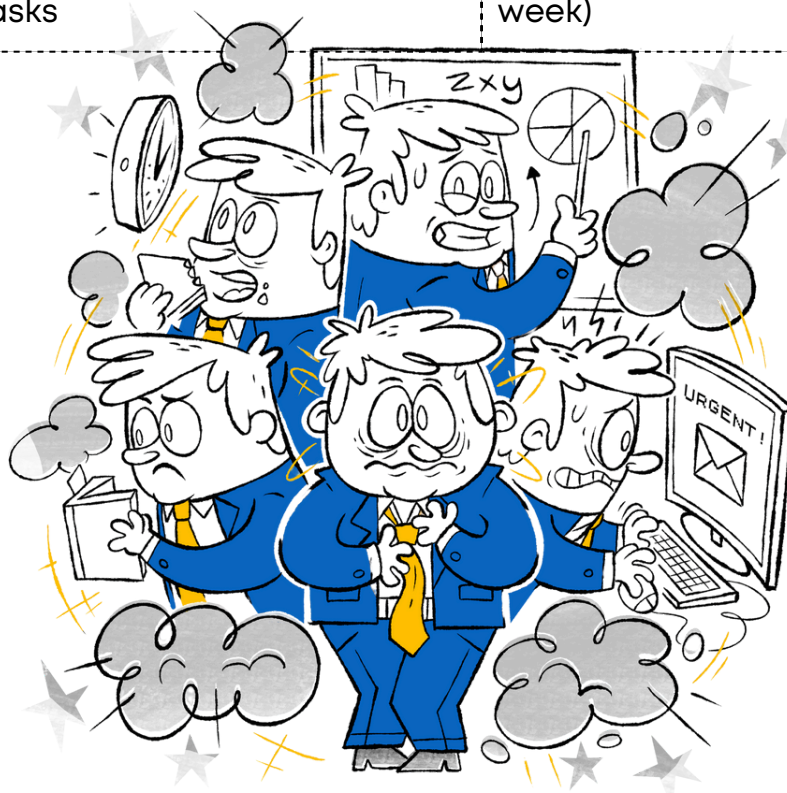
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

3 ALIGN TIME TO OUTCOMES

Once your team members are clear on their short list of priorities in each of the three areas, it's vital to make sure that their time and energy are being used on the right activities.

CALENDAR ZONES

Zone	Description	When to Schedule	Corresponds To
Focus & Forge Time	Deep work on creative, challenging, or novel ideas	Peak energy hours (mornings for most)	My Quest
Collaborate & Connect Time	Interactive work on co-creation, productive conflict, or brainstorming	Midday or energy-neutral times	Others' Quests
Tidy & Tend Time	Superficial work on menial, administrative, or routine tasks	Low energy hours (often end of day or week)	Side Quests



Talk with Your Team - Open a dialogue to get a sense of how big a problem you have with out of control calendars that aren't serving your quests.

- How effectively are we using our time?
- How could we change our meeting structure or our communication norms to free up more Focus & Forge time for everyone?

Talk with Individuals - Coach individual team members to be more deliberate about how they allocate their time and what work they let into which slots.

- Does your calendar this week reflect your top priorities (Your Quests)?
- When are you at your best energy-wise? And are you using that time for your most important work?
- How much time is getting used on side quests? How could you minimize the impact they have on your ability to get to your priorities?
- What could I do to support you in working more efficiently and using your time more effectively?

Use a calendar template to help the individual map out the three different calendar zones. Discuss how many Focus & Forge periods they should be protecting on a typical week. Contract on how many hours should be devoted to Collaborate & Connect and Tidy & Tend time.

The goal is not to create a rigid calendar that can't be changed for any reason. Instead, you want to increase their awareness and encourage them to be more deliberate about how they're using their time.

In the process, you'll learn a lot about demands on their time, especially those that come from you!

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Early					
Morning					
Midday					
Afternoon					
Late					

4 EXPOSE YOUR TIME BANDITS

Finally, once you've prioritized the most important work that needs to be filling their week, it's essential to identify where time and energy are being invested in low-value activities.

COMMON TIME BANDITS

- **Standing Meetings:** Attending because you always have, not because you're needed.
- **Overloaded Invites:** Inviting everyone rather than just the essential contributors.
- **Unclear Communication Channels:** Email, Teams, and Slack used interchangeably for everything.
- **Lack of Agenda Discipline:** Vague objectives or no clear ownership in meetings.

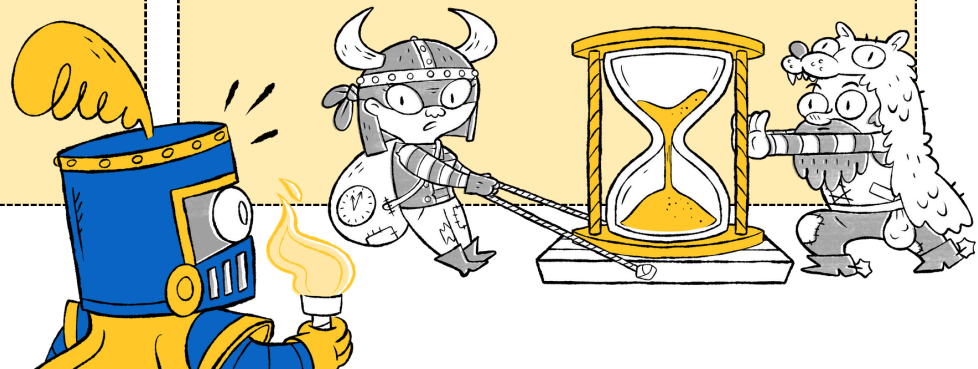
The average North American manager spends 22 hours a week in meetings and 11 hours a week in email. That's more than 80% of their working week in reactive work.

Talk with Your Team - Normalize conversations about the optimal use of time.

- Who is needed in this meeting at this stage? Who can we liberate to work on other things?
- Can we structure our meeting with the broadest agenda items first so people can leave when their part is done?
- How can we use our different communication channels (email, chat, Teams, Slack, phone, meetings) more purposefully so we don't create distractions with messages that aren't urgent?

Talk with Individuals - Work with each team member to identify suboptimal ways they are using their time.

- Show me what's on your calendar and talk me through each item
- Address areas where the person is attending meetings for fear of missing out, rather than for a legitimate purpose. What are the alternatives to attending the meeting?
- What other activities are sucking their time and energy and how could you help reduce the drain?



MANAGER SUMMARY: YOUR ROLE

- Model outcome-focused behavior in your own priorities and schedule.
- Coach your team to distinguish between activities and outcomes.
- Talk about priorities in order, rather than lumping multiple things together.
- Challenge them to protect time for what matters most.
- Celebrate progress on outcomes, not just completed tasks.



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