

Who's Got The Monkey?



The burdens of subordinates always seem to end up on the manager's back. Here's how to get rid of them once and for all.

This discussion topic is based upon an article in the Harvard Business Review that is considered one of the most popular issues ever presented in HBR and that continues to be consistently reprinted.

As an employer/boss/manager you may find yourself running out of time and working lots of overtime while you notice that, curiously enough, your subordinates are typically running out of work (or looking busy but output is limited) and enjoying a personal life. Worse, you cannot get enough of what you don't want...increasingly more overtime and less discretionary time.

For the purposes of this discussion, there are several categories of management time.

Authority-imposed time: used to accomplish activities that authority figures (co-owners, shareholders, senior partner, major investor) require and that the manager cannot disregard without direct and swift penalty.

System-imposed time: used to accommodate requests from peers (partners, spouses) for active support. Neglecting these requests will also result in penalties, though not always as direct or swift.

Self-imposed time: used to do those things that the manager originates or agrees to do.

Subordinate-Imposed time: A subset that is taken up by subordinates

Discretionary time: At the manager's discretion and used as he/she desires

Self-imposed time is not subject to penalty since neither the boss nor the system can discipline the manager for not doing what they didn't know he had intended to do in the first place.

To be effective, managers (and everyone who has an employee is a manager) should try to increase the discretionary component of their time by minimizing or doing away with as much of the subordinate component as possible.

Most managers spend much more time dealing with subordinates' problems than they even faintly realize. Have you ever added up the hours you spend addressing employee issues? It is likely a considerable amount of your time.

This is where the monkey-on-the-back analogy comes in to examine how subordinate-imposed time comes into being and what the manager can do about it.



You are walking down the hall for your morning cup of coffee and notice one of your employees, Bob, heading your way. Bob says to you, "We've got a problem. You see...yadda, yadda". As Bob continues to explain his issue du jour, you recognize in this problem the two characteristics that are common to all the problems Bob and your other employees usually bring to your attention. Namely, a) you know enough to get involved with this issue but b) not enough to make the on-the-spot decision that Bob wants you to make.

You then say something like, "Thanks for bringing this to my attention. Let me think about it and I'll let you know."

Before this hallway encounter, the "monkey" was on Bob's back. After this discussion, it has leaped onto your back. Subordinate-imposed time begins the moment a monkey successfully leaps onto the back of the manager and will not end until the monkey is returned to its proper owner for care and feeding. In accepting the monkey, the manager has voluntarily assumed a position subordinate to his employee.

How did you become a subordinate in this interchange? You accepted a responsibility from Bob and you promised to give Bob a progress report. Bob, now being in charge of you on this issue, will later stick his head into your office and ask, "how's it coming?" This is called supervision.

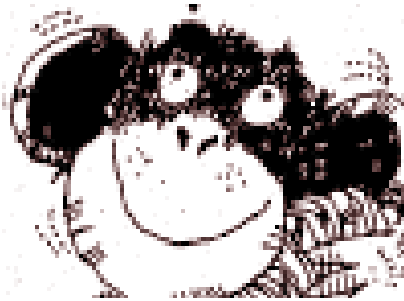
Here is another scenario: Bob tells you the issue in the hallway and you say, "Fine, send me a memo on that." Where is the monkey? Still on the subordinate's back because the next move is in Bob's court. However, the monkey is still poised for a leap and needs to be watched. You receive Bob's e-mail memo and read it. Whose move is it now? Yours. If you do not make the next move soon, you will get a follow-up memo or verbal inquiry from Bob (another form of supervision). The longer you delay in responding, the more frustrated Bob will become (he'll be spinning his wheels) and the guiltier you will feel (Bob's backlog of subordinate-imposed time is mounting). Watch out, the monkey is in motion and coming your way.

Supposing instead you said, "Bob schedule an appointment with me to present your recommendation and supporting reasons on this issue and also list your top 2 alternative solutions with their pros and cons." Where is the monkey? With Bob all the way. You read the memo and can either buy into Bob's top recommendation or the two supporting ideas. Ownership stays with Bob and so does the monkey.

Managers have five degrees of initiative they can select. From lowest to highest they include:

- **Waiting to be told about things**
- **Asking what to do**
- **Making a recommendation, then taking the recommended action**
- **Taking action, but advising others at once**
- **Acting on one's own, then routinely reporting it to others**

Never agree to stay at the lower levels, as it will surely lead to lots of monkeys.



Here is another monkey-rich environment you may have encountered. At a meeting with your employees, you agree to provide *all the necessary backing* for a PR proposal you have asked Mary, your marketing whiz, to develop. Your parting words are “Just let me know what I can do to help”. Mary quickly realizes that she cannot let you know how to help her until you approval the PR proposal in the first place. Further, when Mary delivers the proposal, she realizes it will likely be sitting in either your inbox or briefcase for several weeks before you get to it.

Who really has the monkey? Who will be checking up on whom? Wheel spinning and bottlenecks are well on the way again.

How could this be handled differently? You could ask Mary to prepare the proposal and then present it to the newly formed PR committee of Bob and Jim. They will review the proposal with Mary, fine tune it as they deem appropriate and then have Mary present the result to all of you at an agreed upon and pre-booked meeting. Who has the monkey now? Mary, and to a lesser extent, Bob and Jim share the responsibilities of owning and feeding this monkey.

So why does the boss keep getting the monkey? Because you and your employee assume, wittingly or unwittingly, that the matter under consideration is a joint problem and you, the boss, must come up with the answer. The monkey in each case is ready to straddle or land on your back and then the subordinate no longer owns the problem.

This could result in a huge number of monkeys for you, the boss. Supposing that you have five employees and each of them is so thoughtful as to allow no more than three monkeys to land on your back each week. At the end of one week, you have 15 monkeys holed up in your office. At the end of one month, you could be dealing with a whopping 60 monkeys screaming for attention and food! Far too many to handle and now you are busy juggling with subordinate-imposed priorities. Meanwhile your employees are waiting for answers and probably saying to themselves, “What a bottleneck. He/She just can't make up his/her mind. How anyone ever got that high up in our company without being able to make a decision we'll never know”.

At this point you, the boss, can choose to work late most evenings and probably most weekends to address the never ending supply of monkeys residing in your office or you can permanently return them to their proper owners and eliminate this monkey business.

You can position this in the following way when talking to your employees.

- 1) **At no time while I am helping you with this or any other problem will your problem become my problem.** The instant your problem becomes mine; you no longer have a problem. I cannot help a person who hasn't got a problem.
- 2) **When this meeting is over, the problem will leave this office exactly the way it came in--on your back.** You may ask my help at any appointed time, and we will make a joint determination of what the next move will be but it will not transfer over to me.
- 3) Rules for the care and feeding of monkeys:
 - A. **Monkeys should be fed or shot.** Otherwise, they will starve to death, and the manager will waste valuable time on postmortems or attempted resurrections.
 - B. **The monkey population should be kept below the maximum number the manager has time to feed.** Subordinates will find time to work as many monkeys as they can find time to feed, but no more. It shouldn't take more than 5 to 15 minutes to feed a properly maintained monkey.
 - C. **Monkeys should be fed by appointment only.** The manager should not have to hunt down starving monkeys and feed them on a catch-as-catch-can basis.
 - D. **Monkeys should be fed face-to-face or by telephone, but never by e-mail / mail.** Documentation may add to the feeding process but it cannot take the place of feedings.
 - E. **Every monkey should have an assigned next feeding time and an agreed upon resolution outcome and date.** These may be revised at any time by mutual consent but never allowed to become vague or indefinite. Otherwise, the monkey will either starve to death or wind up on the manager's back.

Conclusion: Get control over the timing and content of what you do with your time. Time is your scarcest resource.

The first order of business is for you as the boss to enlarge your discretionary time by dramatically reducing or eliminating subordinate-imposed time.

Help your employees to help themselves by learning how to look at and address issues and find solutions for those issues. Nobody learns to make responsible decisions without being empowered to do so. Remember this the next time one of your employees brings another hungry monkey into your office.