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# Resources

## What Shadowing Reveals About Three Bad Leadership Habits
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By: Joan Rachel Goldberg

With so much to do, executive staff rarely pause to ponder how productive they really are. And when they do, they frequently come up empty. Self-analysis is hard; we're often blind to our own bad habits. By attacking three common workplace problems, however—and the habits that sustain them—we can jump-start self-analysis and productivity. It took my new consulting career to illuminate mistakes I repeatedly made as an executive director. Generous colleagues and remarkably open clients have added to my wisdom.

So has shadowing. Shadowing is a common practice in medical education, where medical students follow residents. In other fields, job seekers shadow job holders. Yet the practice is virtually unknown among nonprofit executives.

A shadow is neither a coach nor a new best friend. Instead, an executive offers a short-term investment—typically a day being shadowed—in exchange for a substantial payoff: confidential observations and recommendations, presented tactfully but candidly. A shadow can make a palpable difference when you are dissatisfied with the status quo and uncertain about its root causes or how to respond to them. Frequently, it's an organizational assessment or staffing review that leads to shadowing. No matter what the occasion, trust is critical to shadowing success. Let's take a look at three common problems among executives, and what shadowing reveals about possible solutions.

### Doing What Comes Naturally

Perhaps you are an effective and experienced editor. It's not that red ink is your catnip, it's just that you know the value of rewriting. If your staff doesn't, then you likely spend way too much time editing their articles, website postings, emails, and reports. Yes, you add value, but at what cost? Can people ever meet your high standards?

Or perhaps you were a finance director. As executive director, can you afford to question every tiny variance? Should you spend your time recalculating every reimbursement request? Who should be interviewing potential auditors or investment advisors? Of course, it depends somewhat on the number, skills, and experience of your finance staff. But doing what comes naturally may undercut your staff's performance and confidence. And staffers often get sloppy when they know you will clean up after them.

Shadows measure the time executives spend on multiple tasks and quantify the results. Executives often unknowingly spend more time in their "sweet spots," whether it's reviewing finances, editing and rewriting materials, or planning staff events. A shadow can identify ways to save time, but much more importantly, a shadow can point to ways your time can be better spent. And if your shadow once walked in your shoes, you'll be more inclined to listen.

### Spending Too Much Time in Meetings and On Action Items

Where does your day go? If your answer is "emails and meetings," you're not alone. Whether the culprit is organizational culture (communication, transparency) or work process (shared decision making, team-building), when it comes to meetings, explicit goals and guidelines are crucial. Here are six ways to lighten your load:

1. Require meeting goals and agendas in advance.
2. Score meeting requests from 1 to 10, and set a minimum. Most weeks the floor will be a 7. A crazy week might demand 10; a slower week a 5.
3. Teach staff how to set meeting goals.
4. Terminate meetings if they outlast their value. Make staff accountable for maintaining focus and avoiding repetition.
5. Delegate capturing and completing action items and communicating progress.
6. With time saved, devote one to two hours weekly to discussing strategic issues.

### Endless Follow Up on Unresolved Issues or Complaints

Are your requests ignored? Do complaints go unaddressed? Ask yourself:

1. Were your expectations clear? Can staff distinguish an idea from a suggestion from a demand? Clarify and avoid assumptions.
2. Are "who," "what," "when," "where," and "why" clear? Is the "messenger" accessible? Specify or make yourself available to discuss what needs to be done (but only once).
3. Are you providing necessary resources or professional development opportunities?
4. Are there consequences for failing to act? Institute penalties.
5. Are the consequences known? Articulate unambiguous consequences.

A shadow extrapolates from daily to monthly time lost by observing how often you ask different staff to do the same thing, complain when it's not done, or do it yourself. An effective shadow also digs into causes with incisive questions, identifying the staffer who doesn't act quickly and the one who believes there's a better way but is too intimidated to say so.

It's easy to get stuck on problems or overlook root causes. New habits can help you break the hold of bad ones, such as doing staff's work, not holding them accountable, or micromanaging. Try setting a timer for editing or review of financials. Or alter work flow so that some materials literally bypass your desk or screen. Use prominently placed checklists as reminders of new processes. And if staff can't meet standards, take action: Change staff or shuffle responsibilities.

If you're feeling overwhelmed or stymied, a shadow can identify problems, propose solutions, and even jump start change. But there's some truth to that old joke: No matter how many therapists it takes to change a light bulb, the bulb has to want to change.

*Joan Rachel Goldberg is principal and managing director of Strategic Assessment & Solutions, specializing in organizational assessments, environmental scans, strategic planning, brand reviews, communications audits, interim leadership, and shadowing. Email: jgoldberg@sas4nonprofits.com*

Top ^