Here's help for the harried executive

... the personal story of how Wycliffe's chief executive did his job

Whenever mission executives gather, a common complaint in their informal conversations is the impossible pile of work that awaits them on returning to their desks after a trip. Another is the frustration of the rat race that keeps them from writing or the other creative work they want to do. It seems they're so busy struggling with the routine, or putting out fires, that there's no time for anything else.

Is this situation inevitable? Is this the real job of the mission executive, and other desires just that? I say no to both questions. The responsibility of an executive is to relate to and develop people, and to lead. He can only lead if he has time to write, read, interact, and so on.

But the mail must be handled, the fires put out, all the routine seen to—easily more than a full-time job. How can the conflict be resolved? Every introductory management course gives the answer, but it's easier said than practiced: staff for all aspects of the job and then delegate. It is as important for the executive to refrain from doing some (good) things as it is for him to do others. The former is more difficult than the latter.

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Actually, there are many ways adequately to staff and delegate, according to individual preference and style. I'll describe one that has worked for me in my circumstances.

First, I tried to identify what my whole job included. As chief executive, I was responsible to interface between the board and the world, and to make the far-flung operation into a coherent whole. In my case, the world was divided into six area with an area director for each, and four specialties with a vice-president for each. Under their responsibilities were included all of Wycliffe's activities. My job was to work through them.

Second, I tried to decide what was most important for me to do personally, keeping the load reasonable and priorities straight. I then sought others to do the rest. Although the worldwide task was already fully divided among the area directors and vice-presidents, traveling to the fields to keep in touch, relating to other mission leaders, keeping on top of world and mission developments; researching, developing, and writing policy proposals for the semi-annual board meetings, developing overall goals and proposing areas for priority; understanding what should be our critical concerns in light of trends internal and external; and the mail, the ever-present and seemingly ever-growing stack of mail. The mail could easily take all of my time, especially on returning from a trip.

Of all those things I decided, top priority for me personally should be to relate to people: to the area directors and vice-presidents, to the board, the half-dozen other boards I serve on, and to certain meetings of mission leaders.

A staff of four handled the rest: an executive assistant, an executive secretary, a research assistant, and a personal assistant. Together we shared the whole load, each a specific part, but we were quick to let the division of labor blur as the relative loads varied. A close-knit team, we met weekly to share and pray.

The executive assistant was in charge whenever I traveled. He served as interface with much of the world, internal and external to Wycliffe, arranging, gathering, organizing, responding, keeping me informed. He was responsible for highlighting (with a pen) all incoming journals, memos, periodicals, and minutes from branches. That way, I could cover the enormous volume and keep in touch with the key information. We divided

the research and writing projects according to interest and background. For this position, I sought someone who had had field leadership (and thus credibility with the officers and members in general) and asked him to take the job for two or three years. That kept a recent field perspective in my office and enabled him to take a world perspective back to the field.

The executive secretary managed the calendar, files, all incoming and outgoing phone calls, and all travel arrangements. She routed all calls that should or could better be handled by someone else and allowed only those I needed or wanted to come to me. She read all incoming mail (excluding printed matter), and routed any that should be handled elsewhere. The rest we reviewed together. She summarized the contents of each piece and I indicated its handling in one way or another: (1) no action, I was informed of whatever it was about, (2) she would refer it to someone else for action, (3) she would write a reply for my signature, (4) I retained for further reading and action or reply.

When I was gone, she and the executive assistant determined what they should handle or refer, and only what was left remained for me. With this system I could review the mail in a half hour. Even if I had been away for a month, we could catch up in a couple of hours. Those urgent letters I retained could be handled over the next day or so. No big stack lay there nagging me for fear something important would slip through the cracks.

The research associate was responsible for the world file (a current summary of the strategy and situation in each country) and for information flow—collecting and collating key statistics for progress and projections from each field—a vital base for realistic overall planning.

The personal assistant managed the pending box, a file with items pending for each officer and with each project. It was her responsibility to keep me alert to the status of each, to assure the projects were scheduled in a timely way, and that I was adequately oriented to the situation of each officer, particularly when I met him. She also took notes at the administrative and board meetings, the basis for follow-up of each.

I was thus free to put my energies to relating with a solid base, and to the creative items I felt should have my priority. My experience suggests the executive does not have to be harried; the pile does not have to be impossible. How it can be avoided is individual to each person's situation, but the principles are simple and familiar—identify the job, staff for it, determine priorities, and delegate.

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