

## ARTICLE

# To Be More Productive, Put Up Your Feet

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## Key Takeaways:

- Time spent reflecting on the business and how to improve operations is essential to executive-level success.
- Many operations leaders don't log enough quality reflection time because they are too busy putting out fires or they simply don't prioritise scheduling the time into their busy days.
- Developing the discipline to reflect, to prioritise learnings from this time, and to put those learning into action creates a virtuous cycle of continuous improvement that drives breakthrough performance results.

**When leaders intentionally spend time working on the business instead of always working in the business, they lay the foundation for a continuous improvement culture that naturally grows and matures.**

If it's been a while since you made the time to really work on the business, try these strategies to help your organisation and its leaders get into the habit of prioritising reflection time and reaping the many rewards it has to offer.

## 1. Be mindful about what's important versus what's urgent.

Leaders often lack the time to work on the business because they are too busy working in the business. Within any manufacturing operation, urgent matters will inevitably come up from time to time. A line might go down, an accident could happen on the shop floor, a supplier might be late with a critical delivery, or the company may have missed a shipment for a key customer, as just a few common examples.

These issues often necessitate and deserve management attention. However, many manufacturing leaders find themselves constantly operating in firefighting mode, moving from one crisis to the next all day long. Constant attention to the urgent means there isn't enough time or energy to focus on the important issues, such as understanding the reasons or root causes behind these daily problems and focusing on what the organisation can do to address these issues and make meaningful improvements in the way it operates.

Maintenance is a great example. In organisations where the approach to maintenance is reactive and corrective, teams spend most of their time responding to frequently occurring equipment breakdowns.

Manufacturers accept this as the way business is done, even though it would be unthinkable in other industries; planes don't regularly come tumbling out of the sky because bolts weren't tightened. In manufacturing operations that spend time strategically addressing equipment needs, maintenance becomes proactive and, ultimately, predictive, enabling teams get in front of potential issues and prevent downtime before it happens.

## 2. Prioritise working on the business by building it into the schedule.

The HBR CEO time management study “found that an explicit agenda is one of the CEO’s most important tools for making progress on multiple work streams simultaneously, addressing differences in the rate of progress across priorities, and using time effectively despite the need to respond personally to unforeseen events.” The same concept holds true for operations leaders. They need to build time into the calendar to reflect on the day, make improvements, and, perhaps most importantly, to turn the learnings from this thinking time into real actions and results.

Obviously, this is easier to do for operations that run in one shift; reflection on today’s learnings can be built in after production ends, setting up the next shift for a higher level success. In operations where production runs 24/7, this is harder to accomplish. In these environments, there are always urgent issues to address and there is new data coming in all the time. It can be hard for leaders to overcome the feeling that if they step away, they will be hopelessly far behind when they come back.

Putting time for strategic reflection on the agenda—and honouring it—helps leaders develop the discipline needed to regularly work on the business. It could be 30 minutes every day. Or it could be a half or full day leadership retreat scheduled every quarter or every six months.

Determine what makes the best sense for your business, and then put it on the calendar. In permanent ink. With diligence, prioritising working on the business will become embedded into the organisation’s culture and mindset.

## 3. Prioritise the right projects and clearly define the desired results.

Time spent intentionally reflecting on the business always leads to an abundance of new ideas and insights on how to improve operations. It’s not uncommon for leadership teams to come back from a leadership session with 20 new projects to tackle.

It’s important to remember that projects, by definition, represent work that is in addition to leaders’ and employees’ day jobs. So, it’s important to narrow down the list of potential initiatives and decide where it makes the most sense to focus first, being realistic about what the team can take on and accomplish in a given timeframe.

It is equally as important to quantify desired outcomes. ‘Improve maintenance’ or ‘improve supplier performance’ are too vague and can’t be objectively measured. To ensure progress is made and projects get done, set a specific goal tied to a KPI. For example, aim to increase on-time performance from 90% to 93% or to increase throughput by 10%.

## 4. Follow up with action.

With priorities and measurable goals clearly defined, leaders and team members can now appropriately allocate their time and track their progress against project goals. Keep in mind that improvement projects are usually the second priority behind the daily work. However, keeping the goal top of mind and sharing progress toward it can keep teams engaged and committed to finding the time to dedicate to the improvement initiative.

Ideally, improvement work and projects will fit into the management of the day-to-day business. But getting the two can be challenging, and it can be easy for team members and leaders to slip back into firefighting mode and let project work go by the wayside.

Visually sharing results, on performance boards for example, can help. So can bringing in external support to provide oversight and bandwidth and help keep improvement initiatives on track. But experiencing success will be the biggest motivator. If you've set a realistic and measurable goal, teams will know when the objective has been met. Leaders and team members can collectively celebrate the journey of turning reflections into tangible results for the business.

## 5. Nurture the virtuous cycle.

Manufacturing operations leaders who commit time to work on the business will quickly see the results as targeted projects lead to notable improvements in day-to-day operations. Through strategic reflection time, leaders intentionally help move their companies toward the pillars of operational excellence, including fit-for-purpose processes and precision of execution.

These practises, in turn, help further reduce performance problems and the need for firefighting, thus freeing up more time that leaders can spend working on improving the business instead of being tied up working in it. This virtuous loop becomes the foundation for a continuous improvement culture where leaders are intentional about thinking up and thinking through which breakthrough performance improvement their businesses will make next.

## Need help getting started?

Getting in the habit of putting up your feet on a regular basis is often easier said than done. But TBM can help. If you're ready to start the habit of reflecting on what's happening in your business and turning your reflections into results, [reach out](#). We're ready to guide you through the process and accelerate the timeframe so you can realise the benefits faster.

## Meet the Experts



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