How to Stop Overmanaging and Become a Great Leader

Do Nothing!

“Among the most imaginative, fun, and useful leadership books ever published.”

—ROBERT I. SUTTON, author of The No Asshole Rule
LET’S START WITH a dream. You have just come back to work after a three-week vacation. You had time to see some of the members of your extended family and some old friends; you spent a week relaxing at the beach; and you also mixed in a couple side trips to see old ruins and amazing terrain. You didn’t take your cell phone and you didn’t check e-mail the whole time you were gone. You returned home last night, and this morning you have come to work a bit early, thinking that there might be a lot to do. As you were sorting through your mail, the members of your team arrived, at their normal times. They walked by your desk, waved, said “hello” and “welcome back,” and asked whether you had a good time. Then they trundled off to do their jobs.

Throughout the morning, you discovered that there are no pressing issues. Not only that—during your absence, the team scored a big new customer and fixed a nagging problem. Some of your peers in other teams commented that your team members seem very committed, and they seem to be particularly
focused today as well, even when they are working by themselves. In fact, when you check on the status of your team’s various projects, you find that you are ahead of schedule on all but a few. In other words, work is proceeding extremely well.

Sounds wonderful, doesn’t it? Sadly, for most leaders it is only a dream—a nice dream, but only a dream. The reality for most people is that they never take a vacation for as long as three continuous weeks and, if they did, they would take their cell phone, and their laptop, so that they could constantly check on what’s happening back at the office, even when they didn’t really need to; and when they returned to work they would expect the worst, fearing that, because of their absence, the team and their tasks had devolved into chaos and they should never have left in the first place, not even for a day. In other words, for most leaders, their version of reality is more like a nightmare than a dream.

The everyday life of a leader is rarely calm. Their workdays tend to be hectic, fragmented, and fast-paced: finishing everything never happens. Leaders come to work early and leave late; they bring work home with them; they work on weekends—they feel like they have to, just to keep up. This creates enormous pressure, as they see themselves as the most critical members of their teams, the ones who are most responsible for every team member’s outcomes. Many of their team members don’t help, either, as they often look to their leaders to provide critical solutions.

How do leaders respond to this enormous pressure? Their natural reaction is to do more—to do everything that they possibly can. They complain that there are not enough hours in the day (“if only I had more time”), as if they didn’t work extremely hard already.

These observations lead to a simple conclusion: conscientious, dedicated leaders do too much—way too much.

All of us have encountered workaholics—people who define
themselves by their success, who don’t feel fulfilled unless they are putting in exceedingly long hours, and who don’t seem to know that life might actually exist outside of their work.

But we are not talking about workaholics here; we are talking about your normal, everyday, hardworking, achievement-oriented leader. The critical issue here goes beyond workaholics—this is about leaders who love and value their families more than their jobs; who delight in hanging out with their friends and not doing much of anything when they can; who are happy to relax and chill out. This is about people who are accomplished and smart and who work hard, but not to the exclusion of all else. These kinds of people still get sucked into what they think are the demands of being a great leader, of feeling like they need to be reachable 24/7, of believing that they are responsible for every single thing their team members do.

As you have probably guessed, this book takes a very different approach to leadership. Most leaders clearly try to do way too much at work; not only that, because they try to do too much, they perform worse than they otherwise could—and their teams don’t perform as well as they could either.

There is a solution, however. It is far simpler than you might have imagined. Two words:

DO NOTHING!

Yes, nothing. Crazy? Suicidal? Extreme? Maybe. But consider what would happen if you actually took this simple advice and did nothing. You would come to work each day, say hello to the members of your team, see how they are doing, and then you would do very little else. If you actually did this, what would happen?

In physics, a vacuum is particularly fragile: to survive, it must
be contained. If it is not contained, other elements will be drawn to it and will fill the space that it previously filled.

Effective teams work the same way: when chances to excel appear, people want to fill them. Consider an old story about Eastman Kodak Company. After a massive reorganization, a small division was inadvertently left without a leader and without any reporting lines to headquarters. No one in the division seemed to mind. They just continued to do their work, effectively and efficiently, for months. In fact, the top executives at Kodak forgot that they even existed. It took a note to headquarters from a happy customer, thanking the group for their excellent work, before the head honchos realized that this entire division had been “lost” and left on its own. The beauty of this situation, of course, is that the people in this division knew their jobs and did them—they filled the vacuum, and they acted as if they had never needed a leader. They did just fine on their own.

“That wouldn’t happen with my team” might be your immediate, natural reply. But if this is what you were thinking, there is an obvious follow-up question:

How do you know?

The answer, of course, is also obvious: you can’t know since you haven’t tried it.

The point here is simple: why not try it? Do Nothing—and see if the vacuum gets filled. My experience suggests that you will be surprised—wildly surprised. People on your team will reveal skills you never knew they had, and will accomplish things that go far beyond your estimate of their capabilities. They might not do things the way you would do them, but they will get results you never expected—positive results—because everyone has hidden talents, and most leaders never discover them.

Before you reject this approach immediately, ask yourself again: what if you did nothing and it actually worked?
The Key

The key insight here is simple: you will be a more effective leader if, rather than doing the work yourself, you let other people do it. In other words, stop working and start leading.

Some basic examples: engineers who take over an engineering team stop doing basic design; RNs who run employment agencies that provide part-time nurses to hospitals no longer work directly with patients; and CEOs of Fortune 500 companies rarely do their own taxes or mow their own lawns. Nor should they. As you move up in the world, people will look to you to think big thoughts and orchestrate the big issues; they will want you to use broad brushstrokes rather than focusing on details—even if you are really good at being a detail person.

Unfortunately, we naturally anchor on what we have been doing in our current jobs, and we tend to take great comfort in the status quo. Although we may have strong desires to move up in the world, fear, uncertainty, and at least a little anxiety accompany the idea of every upward job change. The “status quo bias” is a pervasive tendency for people to like their current state and to be resistant to change. This even affects people who have just been promoted—they may love the fact that they have been promoted but they still find themselves reminiscing, at least some of the time, about how great it was “in the good old days, when things were simpler.” Things are simpler when other people are in charge and you don’t have to make big decisions. Taking over as a leader means that you must depart from the comfort of the status quo, and the anxiety, fear, and uncertainty that accompany your excitement really are noxious. To avoid these feelings, people naturally fall back on what’s familiar and certain—that is, what they know how to do. Unfortunately, this can be truly counterproductive.
Think, for instance, of technicians who get promoted to manage other technicians. This may be a welcome promotion, a big step on the road to managerial success. One of the biggest problems for these new manager-leaders is their natural urge to exercise their technical skills. Their promotion represents a fundamental change, however, from the world of technology to the world of leadership. Its simplest manifestation is that they must now let other people do the technical stuff: they need to be leaders and use their technical expertise less.

People who ignore this maxim seem to suffer from an old concept called the Peter Principle: they advance to a level and then appear to be incompetent. It’s not that they don’t have the skills to succeed in their new position—it’s that they feel so comfortable using their old, established skills that they often have a hard time changing. Once you’ve been promoted, you must play a whole new ball game. Successful leaders must shift gears and, literally, do less of what they used to do, even though they were good at it.

A simple solution to this problem can allow you to succeed at doing less: figure out who among your team members is good at a particular job and let them do it—even if it’s something that you can do well.

I was never the greatest of students. But some of the things I learned in school have stuck with me for a long time. In high school, in a single term on economics, I learned about the potent concept of comparative advantage. Here’s how it works: when a team is faced with a task, they must determine who does what so that they can complete the task effectively and efficiently. Complex tasks may require the team members to complete a number of interrelated subtasks. If there is a key subtask that only one person is good at, she should be the person who is assigned to that task—even if she is also the best person at another subtask. The logic of comparative advantage rests on the fact that poor
performance on a critical subtask can sink the entire project and, if two people can perform a particular task, you may not need the very best performer for it, especially if they are needed somewhere else and the alternate is good enough. (This fits a wise and important saying: “Don’t let perfect interfere with good enough.”)

The moral of this story is particularly important for leaders: your comparative advantage, as a leader, is not to get involved in doing different jobs. Instead, you must focus on facilitating others’ performance and orchestrating their actions so that they combine their efforts into the most effective final product. If you can let your team members work on jobs that they can do, they will feel better about what they are doing, they will grow and do more, and you will be able to do other things.

Here’s some additional intuition: team members whose leaders do too much see them as micromanagers—but micromanagers never think that they micromanage. As a result, they continue to micromanage, alienating their team members even more and doing far worse as a team than they otherwise could.

This problem is easy to avoid: let people do their work. Have your best writer write the first draft of an important report; have your most persuasive team member make your team’s next pitch; and have your most anal, detail-oriented person check out every detail before you go public. **Don’t do any of these things yourself.** Instead, help people succeed in what they are doing. Spend your time and efforts facilitating their performance: provide your writer with the best information available so she can put it all together in a neat, coherent package; give your best salespeople as many insights about your potential new customer as you and your team can provide so that they can mold their pitch to satisfy the new customer’s most important needs; and let your pickiest nitpicker have at your team’s most recent efforts to ensure that no one is wearing blinders that will embarrass everyone if someone else points out your team’s fatal flaws before you do.
This is what great leaders do. They don’t work; they facilitate and orchestrate. They think of great strategies and help other people implement them. They spend their time on achieving the foresight to be able to see new developments as or just before they happen. They take a broad, comprehensive view of their terrain while they also notice some of the key details so they can confidently choose the best of many possible forks in the road. They don’t do anything—except think, make key decisions, help people do their jobs better, and add a touch of organizational control to make sure the final recipes come out okay.

Leaders who are too busy working, doing a job, can’t do these things—and their teams suffer.

Doing too much is far worse than doing too little. When leaders do too much, they cannot be as effective or as thoughtful or as strategic as they might otherwise be. Even worse, their team members are underutilized and underchallenged. Better team members are also likely to be increasingly angry—because their leader is doing what they could and should and want to be doing. By not letting good performers do their jobs, on their own, leaders don’t allow their team members to feel proud of what they can do. The end result is the development of dislike or even hate for a leader who butts in, as well as earning him a reputation for being a control freak and a micromanager.

Doing Nothing is not easy for people who like their work and are driven to succeed. It is also not easy for people whose ancestors had to work hard just to survive. But if you can get yourself to Do Nothing, you will soon find that your team members will grow as a team, and you will grow as a leader. You just have to get out of their way. This is not a natural approach to work, especially for people who have achieved their leadership positions because they were outstanding performers in their previous jobs.

At this point you may still be saying to yourself, “I must do something. I didn’t get to this exalted leadership position by
doing nothing. Surely there is something that I could and should do, isn’t there?” This is a perfectly natural question.

Here’s what you can actually do: to be a truly effective leader, you should be a facilitator and an orchestrator. Rather than doing work that your team members can do, help them do their jobs better. Facilitate their performance rather than interfering with it. Then add a touch of orchestration, to make sure that Annie finishes her work before William does his so that everything will be ready at the right time. When you facilitate and orchestrate well, your team members will work well, individually and collectively.

When things are really clicking, work will be like the performance of a great Beethoven symphony, with the notes in the right place, the crescendos coming on time, and at the end, a feeling of exhilaration at your collective accomplishments. Leaders and their teams never experience this kind of thrill when leaders do too much.

Here’s some more intuition: How would it feel if all of your team members were living up to their maximum potential? What would your life be like?

I’ve asked hundreds (if not thousands) of leaders these two questions. Their universal, almost identical response starts non-verbally, with a big smile that emerges slowly. Life as a leader becomes pretty wonderful when your team members are all performing as well as they possibly can.

This insight should help leaders think of their jobs differently. A leader’s job is not to do things. Instead, leaders do best when they help other people do as much as they can as well as they can. If each and every member of a team lives up to their maximum potential, the team and its leader will be as successful as they can possibly be.

If you follow this advice, it will make your life easier, and just think what it will do for your team members: they will perform
better, they will feel better about themselves, the team will be more effective, and everyone will benefit—even people who are less excited about their jobs. (Everyone has a spark of pride somewhere, particularly because we invest so much time working. For some people this spark is hard to find. But many people take great pride in doing their jobs well. More on this later.)

It’s Not Easy

Doing Nothing sounds easy, but for too many people, it isn’t, and being a facilitator doesn’t always come naturally either. Most leaders move up through the ranks by displaying their skills and by doing a great job at what they do. Performance—doing things—distinguishes those who move up from those who don’t. The difficult part for many leaders—and what too many leaders don’t see—is that, as you move up, your performance becomes less important than your team’s performance, and for your team to do better, you must do less, in ever-increasing fashion, with every promotion. The logical end point of continuously doing less is to do nothing at all.

This doesn’t happen enough. It’s not easy for type-A leaders to Do Nothing. Take, for example, the story of a student in one of my executive MBA classes. Dan called me one day and said, “Keith, I have great news. I just got promoted to run our IT department.” I congratulated him and told him I was proud of him as this was a big, early promotion. Then he said, in a lower, quieter tone, “I have one problem. I really love doing IT and now that I am running the department, I’m not sure that I’ll be able to use my skills anymore.”

My response was immediate: I told Dan that his promotion was tremendous, that he had been hoping for something like this for some time, that he should be ecstatic, and that he was right, he wasn’t going to be able to do IT anymore.
For the next thirty-five minutes, the two of us repeated the same two ideas: he kept saying how much he loved doing IT, and I kept saying that this was too bad and that he couldn’t do it anymore. Occasionally we changed the wording, but we kept repeating this same story, over and over. He really didn’t want to give up the skills he had worked so hard to perfect.

His predicament is true of every leader: when you get promoted, you can’t rely on your technical skills anymore. Your world has changed; you are no longer a technician; you have to manage and, better yet, you have to lead.

Dan succeeded in not doing IT, but he didn’t succeed right away. He had the good fortune of running a department of truly talented people. For the first few months, he stuck his toes into various projects and did a little IT work—he just couldn’t resist. All too often, he would be reviewing the progress of his programmers and he would jump on their keyboards and add a bit here or a bit there, thinking that he was helping them refine their work. This was particularly frustrating for Dan’s best people: they did their jobs well and, even though their approach was a little different from Dan’s, their results were just as good. They not only felt that Dan was meddling in their jobs, they complained among themselves that he was micromanaging.

Whenever Dan butted in, he always smiled and said, “Let me show you what I mean.” Ultimately this led to one of his best people leaving the company to take another job, “because there I can do my own thing.” Dan tried hard to keep him, but it was too late. Losing this person’s skills was a serious blow to the team, but Dan more than made up for it with a tremendous gain—he finally realized that he had to stop meddling in his team members’ jobs. He had to stop doing IT—cold turkey—even though he loved it.

Luckily, his story has a positive ending, and Dan has lived happily ever since. His problem, though, is all too common: he had
skills that he couldn’t help wanting to use. He was rewarded for using them, too, as his team members and his superiors often complimented him on the job that he was doing in IT, before his promotion to manager. Once he took a leadership role, however, he was never praised for his IT skills, by anyone. Instead he needed to put those wonderfully useful skills on a shelf and shift gears—radically. It wasn’t easy, but not making this change would have put tremendous limits on his future advancement.

Most people don’t make this shift easily. As in Dan’s case, there are almost always bumps in the road, sometimes big bumps, before they get the picture. And some people never do.

**Potential Downsides**

There are times when even the best leaders cannot and should not *Do Nothing*. Two are particularly common.

Number 1: When you are the only one with the skills needed for an urgent task. With time pressure and no one else capable of performing a necessary task, it is obvious that leaders must roll up their sleeves and step in.

But ideally, this should happen only once. Anytime your team members don’t have all of the skills that are needed to complete a job, you must see if you can arrange training for them so they can take over the next time this kind of task surfaces.

This will help them expand their skill sets and allow them to feel that their responsibilities have expanded. At the same time, you can move back to Doing Nothing and leading your team.

If no one on your team has the ability to gain the necessary skills, it pays to consider whether it is worthwhile for
your organization to hire someone who does. In tight economies and small companies, even the big bosses must sometimes roll up their sleeves and do a job. But these are not ideal situations and, for successful companies, they should be temporary.

Number 2: When dirty work needs to be done, everyone should take their turn, including leaders. I define “dirty work” as any job that no one wants to do. (Thus, in a literal sense, it doesn’t have to involve dirt.) Every team has dirty work. The ideal approach to dirty work is to set up a rotation with you, the leader of the team, taking your turn just like everyone else. Loading all the dirty work onto one or two people makes their jobs too heavy; it can also create immediate and long-standing resentment. Also, not including yourself in the rotation can encourage your team members to think that you have put yourself on a pedestal above them—not a good thing.

The ideal solution in a dirty work rotation scheme is for your team members to push you out of the rotation and demand that they take your place. This choice, however, is completely up to them, and even the best teams might hate dirty work so much that they let you take your turn.

These may be the only times that require a team leader to actually get into work and do a job. Even these two instances, however, can ultimately resolve themselves so that leaders can ultimately Do Nothing.

The idea that a leader can play golf every day and not show up for work is obviously fallacious. Effective leaders facilitate and orchestrate: they keep track of what their team is doing to make sure that the job gets done, but they don’t impose and they obviously don’t micromanage (or even come close). Instead, they
structure situations that allow people to excel and to be committed to their teams, their jobs, and their organizations.

Another downside people often worry about when they contemplate doing nothing is the fear of being seen as lazy. Leaders who actually Do Nothing realize that this is not a realistic fear. But fears are not rational, and leaders who are trying to cut back on their activities often think that other people will see them doing nothing and think that they are literally doing nothing.

The beauty of the philosophy behind Doing Nothing is that you only get to Do Nothing when your team members are performing well, and when your team members are performing well, they will be doing their jobs—and who will get the credit for it? If you’re not careful, you will. In fact, even if you are careful, you will. Teams are always reflections of their leaders, and their successes always create a positive glow for the team’s leaders, even if they seemed to Do Nothing to achieve it.

Thus, if your team is successful and people see that you are Doing Nothing, they will not think of you as lazy. Instead, they will want to know your secret. “How does she do it?” will be a common refrain, because too many people don’t realize that they could be far more successful by Doing Nothing, too.

What Will You Do While You Are Doing Nothing?

If you succeed in Doing Nothing, how will you spend your time at work? First of all, you will have time to plan for the future—an unusual luxury. Next, as we’ve noted, you can work to facilitate your team members’ performance, and you can do that without really doing anything yourself. As you facilitate, you should have high expectations for their performance: by expecting a lot from your people, you will generally get a lot. This is what researchers have called the Pygmalion effect.
Pygmalion was a fictional character in the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid’s narrative poem about the history of the world up until Julius Caesar’s time; he finished writing it in A.D. 8. Pygmalion was a sculptor who was not attracted to the local women, as many of them were prostitutes. Instead, he fell in love with a statue he had made of a woman. At Venus’s festival, he made offerings to the goddess and asked (hopefully) for his statue to be turned into a real woman. Venus sent Cupid to kiss the sculpture’s hand, transforming it into a beautiful woman whom Pygmalion ultimately married. In other words, he was one lucky guy.

Pygmalion also had really high expectations. As a result, his name is now associated with an effect researchers have frequently observed: the high expectations of an authority figure—traditionally, the instructor in a classroom—can lead individuals to perform better than they would have if the leader/teacher did not expect so much from them. In essence, when a leader expects a lot, team members typically respond in kind. Why? In large part because high expectations, even when they are not warranted, change how the teachers themselves behave.

Teachers do all sorts of positive things for their high-expectation students: they pay more attention to them; they praise them and encourage them more; they reward and punish them more; they call on them more in class discussions; they talk with them more; and they are more accepting, positive, and supportive of them. They are also biased in how they evaluate them.

It makes sense for leaders to emulate these effective teachers.

In studies on adults, Pygmalion effects have been strongest for people in the military, among men, and in situations where leaders start with initially low expectations.

Several Pygmalion studies have been conducted in the Israeli Defense Forces. In one, soldiers were enrolled in a fifteen-week course on combat command. Their instructors were told that all of the soldiers had taken a highly reliable set of tests and
had received ratings by previous instructors on their command potential. The results of the tests indicated that one third of the group of soldiers—randomly chosen, so they were actually no better or worse than anyone else in the course—had scored “High” and were expected to excel in the course, as well as in their careers as commanders. Another third had supposedly achieved a score of “Regular” and were expected to do well but not extremely well. A final third were not classified due to “a shortage of data.”

Fifteen weeks later, at the end of the course, the High-score soldiers took a battery of tests and achieved scores that were 22.7 percent better than those of the Regulars. Their attitudes toward the course were also 46.3 percent more positive than the Regulars; they even felt that their instructors had displayed more leadership, by 22.9 percent.

Effective leaders can get the same kinds of effects. In particular, teams can benefit enormously when their leaders have high, positive expectations. This should be a consistent message. It’s also a message that you don’t have to convey verbally. If you consistently have high standards and you are committed to them, your team members will get the message and will do their best to reach them. And getting this message across doesn’t require that you do anything—your team members will get a good sense of how you feel from your everyday, high-standard activities.

The Bottom Line

When you get promoted to a leadership position, you must give up your past—a past that you have worked extremely hard to create—and do less and less so that you can achieve more. Too many leaders do way too much. When they do too much, they are not doing their new job—instead, they are doing their old job, and
Expected Command Potential at the Start of the Course

Soldiers' average performance

Regular  Unknown  High

65  70  75

Expected Command Potential at the Start of the Course

Soldiers' attitudes toward the course after it was over

Regular  Unknown  High

3  4  5
they block their team members’ chances to flourish. Leaders who do more than they need to do get in the way, misutilize their leadership skills, and miss a great leadership opportunity.

This applies to many, many leaders—even people who are effective, successful leaders. As a business school professor, I’ve met thousands of people who are really successful. Only a handful have acknowledged that they do nothing. This means that many successful people could be even more successful, more effective, and achieve even more if they could only let go and do less.

This book is a challenge: it looks at leadership in an entirely different way, a way that is not particularly natural. With all due respect for the hard work of so many fine people and so many effective leaders around the world, I suggest that leaders start chanting a new mantra: Do Nothing! We will all be better for it.

This mantra should be your ultimate goal as a leader. When you can Do Nothing and see that your team is doing its job well, it means that you are doing yours, and you are doing it better than when you did too much.

The Litmus Test

Here’s a final litmus test for whether you have achieved this goal. Let’s go back to the dream at the start of this chapter. You were on vacation for three weeks without checking your e-mail or your cell phone. Leaders who can actually do this and return to work and find that things are running smoothly have passed the test. They have become truly effective leaders. There’s also a lovely by-product here: their teams will be truly effective teams.

So go on vacation. Leave your work phone at home. If your team needs to call you, this is a perfect opportunity for a test: don’t reply and see what they can do. They might surprise you,
and they might even surprise themselves. Not only that, they might never call at all.

Does this strike fear into your heart? Or does it just seem impossible? It doesn’t have to be. Set your sights on Doing Nothing, and you may find yourself being able to take a truly wonderful and completely relaxing vacation. How does that sound?