# The Five Laws of Lasership

How to Lead Like a Laser in a Crazy Busy World



### **Bill Zipp**

A Radical New Approach to Time Management

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The Five Laws of Lasership

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## Introduction

In the 1960s, computers exploded onto the social scene. Then, as now, people were worried about the impact of technology on everyday life. So Congress did as Congress always does, they had a hearing.

Imagine that!

Before a Senate subcommittee experts predicted, as reported in *TIME* magazine, that in 20 years due to advances in technology, Americans would work just 22 hours a week—27 weeks a year—and retire at 38. The greatest challenge facing us in the technological future would be finding a way to fill up all our free time.

Wow, was that ever wrong!

Even before COVID, meetings made possible by technology dominated our days, and after COVID, well you can forget about finding ways to fill up your free time because that's when you do the work you didn't get done from being in even more meetings. Not to mention a labor shortage that's left us all with way too much to do and 24/7/365 availability around the world made possible, again, by technology.

We all feel this pressure, as phrases like "Zoom fatigue" have become part of our everyday lexicon and "karoshi syndrome," a common occurrence in Japan that means death from overwork.



What's the answer to this dilemma?

Not productivity principles from the past that urged us on to greater and greater efficiency. As helpful as that might have been a decade ago, this approach is no longer useful, for no amount of productivity will allow us to complete the endless amount of work we have to do. Just like no amount of driving efficiency will get us to the airport in ten minutes if the trip takes sixty.

This eBook takes a dramatically different approach to how we manage our time, using the metaphor of laser light versus sunlight.

The sun is a powerful source of energy. Billions of kilowatts of light pour from this star at the center of our solar system. A laser is a weak source of energy, just a few meager watts, infinitesimal compared to the sun. But those few watts are focused, unlike the sun, in a very narrow stream of light.

Under the diffused rays of the sun's light, we lay on a beach towel and fall asleep, blocking its side effects with a bottle of lotion. Under the direct penetration of a laser beam, diamonds—one of the earth's hardest substances—are cut into pieces and cancerous tumors are surgically removed.

Most leaders approach time management like the sun. They're nice and warm and friendly, never saying no to anything, being available for every request. As a result, their impact is diffused an inch deep and a mile wide, and they ultimately burn out. For unlike the sun, they aren't the center of the solar system with a limitless supply of energy.

Laser-like leaders, however, do the just the opposite. They apply the discipline of focus to everything they do, channeling their limited resources an inch wide and a mile deep. By doing this, they maximize their impact within the organizations they serve, like cutting diamonds and completing surgery.

In each of the next five chapters, we're going to look at what I call The Five Laws of Lasership: How to Lead Like a Laser in a Crazy Busy World.

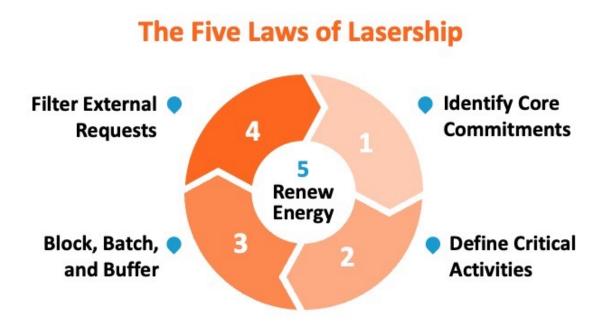
#### The five laws are:

- 1. Identify Your Core Commitments
- 2. Define Your Critical Activities
- 3. Block, Batch, and Buffer
- 4. Filter External Requests
- 5. Renew Your Limited Energy

In writing this eBook, I've become convinced that there is no greater challenge for leaders right now than managing the overwhelming demands on our time. I've also become convinced that the traditional approach to time management doesn't work any more. No amount of efficiency will allow us to get done what we need to get done today.

And finally, I've become convinced that there's a better approach to the entire topic, one that's not an inch deep and mile wide, but an inch wide and a mile deep, leading like a laser.

Let's dive in.



# LAW ONE: Identify Your Core Commitments

## Identify Your Core Commitments

Most leaders approach the management of their time like the sun. They're nice and warm and friendly, never staying no to anything, being available for every request. As a result, their impact is diffused an inch deep and a mile wide.

Laser-like leaders, however, do the just the opposite. They apply the discipline of focus to everything they do, channeling their limited resources an inch wide and a mile deep, expanding their impact exponentially.

Which kind of leader are you? What kind of impact are you having? And, most importantly for this eBook, where do you begin?

You begin by identifying your core commitments, Law One of the Five Laws of Lasership. That is, determine your top three priorities.

"Leaders who execute well focus on three very clear priorities that everyone can grasp," declare Larry Bossily and Ram Charan in *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*.

"A leader who says, 'I've got ten priorities' doesn't know what he's talking about—he doesn't know himself what the most important things are. You've got to have a few, clear, realistic goals which will influence the overall performance of the company."

I tried to lead like the sun in my consulting practice. Google sales training and 1,970,000,000 responses come up. I assumed to break into this crowded marketplace I had to do a little bit of everything. So I did. Anything that had to do with sales, I was your man.

And it didn't work.

About ten years ago, mostly out of sheer frustration, I took a dramatically different approach. I focused on three things and three things only: one-on-one coaching senior sales leaders, training frontline sales managers, and content creation, like *The Ultimate Sales Manager Playbook* I published and this current content.

And my business exploded, doubling and almost tripling annual revenue. Why? Because of the first law of lasership. I identified my core commitments and focused on them relentlessly.

Remember, a laser, like you, has limited energy, unlike the sun. So it can only be effective when its light is streamed in a direct, intentional way.

What are your core commitments? What are your top priorities? You only get three or four in your professional life and three or four in your personal life, which for me is my marriage, my adult children and aging parents, and a nonprofit ministry I support with my time and money. That's it. More than that and our energy is hopelessly diffused.

Or as Seneca said in AD 54, many centuries before modern-day technology, "To be everywhere is to be nowhere."

So where are you? Leading like a laser starts by first limiting the focus of your energy to a vital few priorities.

And here's the funny thing about that. The minute selection is limited, it results in greater consideration. Give a child a box of candy but tell them they can only have one piece, and they'll spend hours thinking through their pick of the perfect bite of chocolate.

The same is true for you. When you limit the focus of your work to three to four core commitments, it gets you thinking. Which of these are the best use of my gifts and abilities? Which will have the greatest impact on people? Which will best grow the business?

Answering those questions is how I landed on coaching, training, and content creation. Your answers will be different, but the questions are the same, a triangulation of proficiency, people, and profit, as illustrated in The Focus Filter on the next page.

Make a list of the professional commitments you're currently pursuing. Rate them on a scale of 1-10 for each of these considerations: alignment with your gifts and abilities, impact on people, and influence on the growth of the organization your serve. Which three or four score the highest?



Here, at least, is a starting point.

But Bill, you say, you don't have a boss, so you can do anything you want with your top priorities. Don't be so sure of that!

The bosses I have are prospects and customers for whom I need to build a compelling business case, for example, around frontline sales leader development, something at which I'm an expert. When a frontline sales manager learns how to coach her team members, those salespeople instantly getter better at selling, which, in turn, drives robust top line revenue. See the triangulation of proficiency, impact on people, and profit?

As I build this business case, I explain to a company that if they train their salespeople and not their sales managers, they're training the competition, because those sellers will leave and go somewhere else because of a bad manager. More often than not, that argument wins the day.

Now it's your job do do the same. Build a business case for each of your top priorities, just like your boss was a sales prospect. And make that case with clear data and compelling stories.



### **Journaling Exercise One**

- 1. Make a list of all the commitments you are pursuing in your professional life.
- 2. Review this list and identify the three or four top priorities that are central to your success based on their alignment with your gifts and abilities, impact on people, and growth of the business. Use the 1-10 rating system I suggested earlier to do this.
- 3. What impact will fulfilling these core commitments have on the advancement of your career?
- 4. What professional commitments need to be let go?

# LAW TWO: Define Your Critical Activities

## Define Your Critical Activities

Now go deeper.

The point of doing less, limiting your output to three or four top priorities, is to do more. This is the purpose of being an inch wide: going a mile deep, maybe even two or three miles deep. That's how lasers have their powerful impact.

Going deep means defining for each of your core commitments the critical activities that flow from them, the most important things of the most important things. This is Law Two of the Four Laws of Lasership.

"Working on fewer things can paradoxically produce more value in the long term," Cal Newport writes in his brilliant book *Slow Productivity*. "Overload generates an untenable quantity of unproductive overhead."

To go deeper, let's use the law of threes. Each week define for your top three or four priorities the top three tasks for each. Your VIP's, very important priorities, now have VIT's, very important tasks.

Do this using the questions we posed in the last chapter: Which of these tasks are the best use of your gifts and abilities? Which will have the greatest impact on people? Which will best grow the business?

You now have 9-12 tasks to focus on every week fully aligned with your top priorities. These aren't the only things you do in a week, but they are the main things you do in a week, the first things. Schedule your VIT's in your calendar and make sure at least 80% of your time and energy is devoted to them.

Some of these tasks may reoccur every week, like one-one-ones with your team members. Some of these tasks are worked on and completed, like my writing this eBook.

And I get it, every week—perhaps even most weeks—won't have perfect 3-3-3 symmetry. That's not the point. The point is to define ten or so critical activities every week that flow from your core commitments and focus on them relentlessly, like a laser. The cumulative effect of completing 500 top priority tasks over the course of 50 weeks in a year is super, super powerful. Life changing, in fact.

An important practice that allows you to achieve this laser-like leadership is a weekly meeting with yourself to review the past week and plan the next week. Apart from this discipline, the busyness of the world will obliterate you best intentions, like the ocean tide obliterates even the most beautiful sandcastles.

#### Here's how a weekly meeting with yourself works:

First, set a regular, protected appointment in your calendar for 30-45 minutes, like you would a doctor's appointment. Some of my coaching clients do this on Friday afternoon before they leave for the weekend, others do it early Monday before the week begins. Personally, I prefer the quiet reflection of Sunday morning.

Next, review your VIP's, Very Important Priorities, and renew your commitment to them. Then review your VIT's, Very Important Tasks, that flow from your top priorities, specifically the past week's execution of them. What went well? What didn't go so well? What can you do differently?

Finally, with this critical information from the past week, plan the next week. Identify the top three tasks for each of your top three to four priorities and schedule them in your calendar so they get done. Again, these aren't the only things you do in a week, but they are the first things, the most important things the top ten things.

All of this is filtered through the grid of proficiency, people, and profit, the Focus Filter. Which of these tasks are the best use of your gifts and abilities? Which will have the greatest impact on people? Which will best grow the business?

For me that lead question is paramount. I want everything I do to flow from the best use of my gifts and abilities.

For example, one of my professional priorities, content creation, emerged from understanding that the best way I could build my business was through writing and speaking. I've tried all other kinds of sales and marketing techniques but writing and speaking works for me because they're two of the things I'm the most skilled at doing, and they have tremendous impact on people.



When I realized that and gave myself wholeheartedly to it, first publishing a book on sales leadership and then starting a YouTube channel on the same topic, my business boomed. The same will happened for you as you stay true to your core competencies.

"The marketplace doesn't care about your personal interest in slowing down," Cal Newport observes soberly in *Slow Productivity*, "If you want more control over your time, you need something to offer in return. More often than not, your best source of leverage will be your own abilities."

In other words, what do you do well and what do you love to do? Invest your time and energy there. Not just something you love to do but don't very well, like golf. Or something you do well but don't love to do, like Excel spreadsheets. Neither produces word-class performance, but both together provide the passion and excellence that focuses your energy like a laser, allowing you to cut diamonds.

Now that your core commitments are in place and you've defined the critical activities that flow from them, the moment of truth has arrived. Your calendar. Here's where some traditional productivity principles are helpful. In the next chapter we'll look at blocking, batching, and buffering in the service of your highest priorities.



### Journaling Exercise Two

- Right now, schedule a 30-45 minute weekly recurring meeting with yourself where you review the past week and plan the next week. What is the day and time of that meeting?
- 2. Review your core commitments from the last chapter, your top professional priorities. What critical activities flow from them?
- 3. Identify three of the most important activities for each of your core commitments that need to be completed this week. Try to limit these to a top ten list for the week.
- 4. What weekly activities didn't make your top ten list and need to be let go because they don't fulfill your core commitments?

# LAW THREE: Block, Batch, and Buffer

## Block, Batch, and Buffer

Once you've set your core commitments and defined the critical activities that flow from them—your VIPs and your VITs—certain productivity principles are helpful. Namely three, blocking, batching, and buffering.

We'll go over each in turn, but it's important to note that our approach to time management hasn't suddenly changed. We're not going to pursue efficiency for efficiency's sake, frantically trying to drive to the airport in ten minutes when it really takes sixty. Rather, we're implementing time-tested techniques in the service of greater effectiveness.

#### Blocking

Blocking is a technique that we're all familiar with, even though we may not refer to it as such. It's scheduling in our calendar an event for a specific time, so it's protected from other conflicting events, the dreaded double-booking. The exercise I recommended in the last chapter, scheduling a 3—45 minutes weekly planning meeting with yourself, is an example of time blocking.

Most of us, however, only use this technique for meetings or doctor's appointments, but it works just as well for tasks. The entire week I'm in right now has been time-blocked to write this Lasership content. Aside from one meeting I couldn't move on Wednesday morning, all I'm doing this week is researching and writing on this topic.

Peter Drucker declares in the *Effective Executive*, "Concentration—that is, the courage to impose what really matters most and comes first—is the executive's only hope of mastering time and events instead of being their whipping boy."

That's what time blocking is, imposing in our calendar what really matters most and comes first with both our meetings and our tasks, so we don't become the whipping boy of time and events. And, yes, it takes courage to have this kind of concentration.

#### Batching

Batching is a technique that works both inside and outside the boundaries of time-blocking. Batching groups similar tasks together to be completed in sequence without distraction. In the industry I'm most familiar with, successful sales professionals schedule outbound sales call time blocks two to three times a week (Notice how this is the scheduling of a task and not just a meeting). Then, during those time blocks, they complete one call after another call after another, building up sales momentum with every contact. That's batching.

Less successful sellers make a sales call, get up and fill their coffee mug, chat with a colleague, check their email, browse the Internet, make another sales call (maybe), go get some more coffee. See the difference? Batching is a powerful way of focusing like a laser on critical tasks that flow from a top priority.

Batching is also a great way to attend to lower priority tasks without getting derailed by them. I manage email by batching it together all at one time at the beginning of my workday, in the middle, and at the end. In this way, email doesn't interrupt me all throughout the day, and my responses are crisp and concise because the activity has my uninterrupted attention.

The direct opposite of batching is context switching, or the myth of multitasking. The myth of multitasking, like Big Foot, the Abominable Snowman, and the Loch Ness Monster, is that it actually exists. It does not.

It's not possible for the human brain to simultaneously process two activities at the same time. What we call multitasking is not multitasking at all but context switching with a side of neurological tomfoolery.

"When we think we are multitasking, our brains are actually moving from one thing to the next, and our performance degrades for each new task we add to the mix." writes MIT professor Sherry Turkle in *Reclaiming Conversation*. "Multitasking gives us a neurological high so we think we are doing better and better, when actually we are doing worse and worse."

If you want to lead like a laser, stop trying to multitask immediately. It can't be done. Group similar activities together and act on them in a focused manner during a protected period of time.

#### Buffering

I've often used the well-worn image of putting big rocks in a bucket, then pebbles and sand for the importance of scheduling top priorities first—your big rocks—and letting everything else sift around them. And this principle is sound. But the unintended consequence of this metaphor is that we feel compelled to fill the bucket to the top, oftentimes with things that don't matter at all.

This is the opposite of buffering. Buffering doesn't schedule every minute of every day, filling our bucket to the brim with sand, because that kind of frantic intensity is distinctly unproductive.

Consider a different metaphor. Imagine being at the beach and building a fire at your campsite. You gather logs, stack them together, and spark the kindling.

Soon a warm, glowing campfire is burning. What makes this fire possible? Space between the logs where oxygen flows and feeds the fire. For if the logs are packed too tightly, the flame chokes out and the fire dies. Or never starts at all.

Space between the logs is not a comforting luxury. It's an absolute necessity.



That's what buffering does for you. It's not scheduling meeting after meeting with no breaks in between but allowing space between these logs so your fire doesn't go out. It's not saying yes to so many things that your task list becomes overwhelming and just looking at it brings waves of exhaustion.

There's an ancient practice called *statio* that's worthy of consideration here. *Statio* is honoring the moments between the moments in life and not rushing on to the next big thing. *Statio* calms the heart and settles the mind before jumping into another meeting by taking a few minutes of mindfulness, mini-doses of silence and solitude that hydrate our soul like drinking water throughout the day hydrates our body.

*Statio,* or what we've referred to here as buffering, recognizes that leadership is a marathon, not a sprint and keeps us focused on the most important things of the most important things instead of trivial minutiae. Like what? Like a laser.

Blocking, batching, and buffering allows you to build a work week that focuses on your core commitments and the critical actives that flow from them, the most important things of the most important things. In short, they allow you to lead like a laser.

In the next chapter we're going to look at a strategy for responding to the external requests of others in a way that both affirms their ask and maintains the integrity of your calendar.

### **Make Meetings Matter**

One of the ways you can lead like a laser is in the meetings you run and the meetings you attend. Meetings can be the biggest waste of time in business or a powerful tool that gets stuff done. The difference? Leadership.

John Anner has led not one but two successful organizations. The first, a for-profit company he started with only a few hundred bucks, is the Independent Press Association. This startup grew to a multimillion-dollar enterprise in a very competitive marketplace. The second is a not-for-profit organization, the East Meets West Foundation. The East Meets West Foundation provides clean water, medical treatment, and education to developing countries, primarily in Southeast Asia.

"The most useful thing I've ever done in any organization is train the staff on how to have efficient meetings," Anner says in the brilliant book *168 Hours: You Have More Time Than You Think* by Laura Vanderkam.

#### What are his rules for meetings?

- No one goes to a meeting who doesn't need to be there.
- Every meeting has an agenda.
- At the beginning of the meeting, the leader spells out the purpose of the meeting.
- At the end of the meeting, the participants go back through the agenda to review what needs to get done before the next meeting.

Meetings in his organization are short, sharply focus affairs that begin on time and end on time. By increasing meeting efficiency, Anner says, "It gives me *at least* ten extra hours a week."

What would you do with ten extra hours in a week?

You can start answering that question by implementing the meeting template on the next page for all the meetings you are responsible for leading. After getting this skill under your belt, use your leverage to influence others to use this template for all of their meetings.

### **A Laser Meeting Template**

Meeting N	ame:
Date:	
Start Time:	End time:
Purpose:	
Attendees:	:
Agenda:	
1.	Review of Action Items from last meeting
2.	
3.	
4.	
Action Iter	ns:
1.	
2.	
3.	
Document	s Needed for This Meeting:



### Journaling Exercise Three

- 1. Pull out your calendar. Schedule time blocks of one, two, or even three hours to complete your critical activities. Remember, you can time block *both* meetings and tasks.
- 2. What critical activities can be sequenced one after the other to build momentum and make your time blocks more productive?
- 3. How can you apply the meeting template to the meetings you run? How can you influence others to use it in the meetings you attend?
- 4. How will you schedule space between the logs in your life? That is, how will you set up buffer time between time blocks, so your fire doesn't burn out? What will you do in that buffer time to refresh your body and soul?

# LAW FOUR: Filter External Requests

## Filter External Requests

It's time to play Side B.

For those of us alive before CDs and Spotify, Side B was the flip side of a vinyl record that did not get as much air play as Side A. But not always.

Famous Side B tracks are *We Will Rock You* by Queen, *Revolution* by the Beatles, and *You Can't Always Get What You Want* by the Rolling Stones. All great songs.

Side A of the Five Laws of Lasership focused on our own internal considerations when it comes to core commitments and critical activities, but that's not the real world, is it? The real world has bosses and colleagues, customers and employees, external forces that make significant demands on our time.

How do you deal with that? Side B, Law Four: Filter External Requests, a law that may be more helpful to you right now than the three previous principles.

Here's our starting point: not every external request should make it into you calendar or on your things to do list if you want to lead like a laser.

"The pressure on leaders to do 984 different things is unbearable, so the effective ones learn how to say no and stick with it," observed the late, great Peter Drucker, "Too many leaders try to do a little bit of everything and get nothing done. They are very popular because they always say yes, but they don't get anything done."

So how do you say no and stick with it? First by installing a decision-making filter for every request you receive, and that filter is the three questions we've been asking ourselves over and over again in previous chapters. Is this the best use of my gifts and abilities? Will it have the greatest impact on people? Will it grow the business?

Most external requests are not bad, they just may not be best for you. As good as something may be, good is the enemy of the best. But some external requests can surprise you and open wonderful doors of opportunity. That's why we don't reject them immediately but use The Focus Filter for them.

As an executive coach, I get contacted constantly about tools and assessments that I can use in my practice. I ignore most of these pleas, but one day an email crossed my path about an assessment I hadn't heard about. I looked into it further and found it to be deeply researched and extremely reliable. It has since become the backbone of my work with C-Suite executives.

The three-question filter guided my consideration of this assessment, and—here's a very important principle—it replaced something I was already doing.

When you say yes to an external request, you can't just add it to the list. You must move something off the list and replace it with that request, or you'll find yourself in overload, with random tasks sticking to you like flies on flypaper.

This is what clutter consultants do for hoarders on reality TV. Once they clean up a messy home, inevitably the person buys something new. No problem, the clutter consultant says, take something out of your home before you put something new in it.

This is perfect advice for our calendar as well, which can often look like a hoarder's house. And just like any house, it has limits to it. So when you bring something new into your week, swap out a time block and a batching sequence for it. Don't compromise, however, on the space between the logs, buffer time, or your fire will go out.

While there'll be some things you'll say yes to in this way, most of your external requests, as Peter Drucker notes earlier—the 984 things—will have to be said no to. How do you do that and still keep your job? Here's a proven three steps process I refer to as saying no by saying yes.

#### **Step One: Appreciate and Affirm**

The first thing to do when a request comes your way and your filter advises you to say no to it, is to respond with positive appreciation and affirmation.

For example, an executive coaching client I was working with was asked by the head of HR to participate in building out a leadership mentoring program for the company. He believed in mentoring, which was one reason he was working with me, but it didn't fit into his already cluttered calendar.

So he thanked this person genuinely for their consideration of him and for the HR department's commitment to leadership development. This is the first way to say no by saying yes.

#### Step Two: Make Aware

After expressing his genuine appreciation and affirmation, my client made the head of HR aware that he was working on a significant top of the funnel lead generation project that could transform the entire sales organization. This was a big, big deal that required his undistracted time and attention. In other words, it was a huge yes to himself and the company.

Here's the reality of organizational life today. There are simply too many moving parts for people to know what other people are doing. Maybe they should, especially HR, but they don't. It's your job in a clear and respectful way to make others aware of the top priorities you're pursuing. And it's not fair, both to you and that priority, to bring something new into an already full house without taking something away.

#### **Step Three: Provide Alternatives**

Finally, my client said no by saying yes to the head of HR by providing her with two alternatives.

The first alternative was a member of his leadership team who would do a excellent job in helping build out a mentoring program. I love this option because it provides opportunity for someone else to grow and expands the capacity of the organization.

The second alternative was the date my client anticipated his lead generation project would be completed. He simply asked to be contacted then. Use this alternative, however, only if this request makes it through your proficiency, people, and profit filter.

This filtering process applies to the myriad of meeting requests that cross our path, most of which do not pass the proficiency, people, and profit test. And, of course, filtering task requests like the one we are considering here eliminates the collateral damage, I mean all the meetings that accompany it.

You can walk through these steps in a brief email, like my client did with the head of HR, or it may take place over multiple conversations with your boss or your boss' boss as you are "volunteered" for various meetings and tasks. But the point is this, neither you nor I can do everything that is asked of us, so we must commit ourselves to doing the most important things, focusing on them intently like a laser, and learn how to say no to the rest in a positive, professional manner.

Google's productivity expert, Laura Mae Martin, refers to this a being clear about boundaries by using a positive framework. She advises in her book *Uptime* not to say, "I don't schedule meetings on Friday" but rather "I schedule meetings Monday through Thursday." Or not to say, "I don't text outside of work hours" but rather "I'm available by text from 7:00 AM to 5:00 PM." And finally, "I don't review contracts in less that 24 hours" but rather "I review all contracts within 48 hours."

#### See the difference?

Warren Buffet once declared, "The difference between successful people and really successful people is that really successful people say 'no' to almost everything." There's a ton of truth in that statement, but it has to be done in the right way or it will kill your career—unless you're a multi-billionaire—a way that affirms both the person making the request, what you have said yes to, and genuinely offers alternatives.

Finally, we're going to look at The Fifth Law of Lasership, renewing your limited energy by the use of hard stops.



## Journaling Exercise Four

- 1. List the external requests that have come to you in the last month (or last week). Which of these requests were aligned with your core commitments and which of them were not?
- 2. For the external requests the were aligned with your core commitments, which activities did you remove from your calendar or task list so that your work life isn't cluttered like a hoarder's house?
- 3. Pick one request you said yes to that is not aligned with your core commitments. Write and send a brief email using the three steps above and say no to it. Rinse and repeat as many time as necessary.
- 4. Over the next month, respond to external requests that aren't aligned with your core commitments by using this process.

# LAW FIVE: Renew Your Limited Energy

# Renew Your Limited Energy

There's a magic about hard stops that produce meaningful behavior change. Every year millions of Americans gather crumpled receipts and fill out arcane tax forms because of the hard stop of April 15.

Everyday millions of travelers race to get to the airport forty-five minutes before take-off because of the hard stop of not being able to board their flight.

These hard stops, fixed deadlines after which there are painful consequences, drive action.

As we wrap up The Five Laws of Lasership, I want to reflect on how important it is for a laser-like leader to rest and renew their limited energy, Law Five. Hard stops help us do that.

First a bit of context.



Morten Hansen researches workplace behavior. One particular workplace behavior that baffled him was why certain colleagues at his firm, who worked incessantly around the clock, never seemed to get promoted to meaningful roles or receive significant assignments, while other colleagues who didn't work late into the evening or on the weekends and used up all their vacation time, did.

His research on this curious question led to him the following conclusion in the insightful book *Great At Work*:

"If you work between 30 and 40 hours per week, adding more hours on the job lifts your performance, but once you're working between 50 and 60 hours per week, the benefit of adding additional hours drops off."

Squeezing an orange is Hansen's analogy for this dynamic. At first when you squeeze, juice flows freely. But as you continue to press, the orange yields only a few more drops of liquid and then nothing at all, no matter how hard you try. His conclusion? "If you're already working 50 hours per week, resist the temptation to invest more hours at work. Instead, ask yourself, 'How can I work smarter, rather than more?'"

Or in the metaphor we've been developing, "How can I lead more like a laser?"

Let's say you're willing to work 45-50 hours a week. That's 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM Monday through Friday with two early mornings and one later evening. That's it. Stop working after that! These are your hard stops, use them like April 15 to focus on your core commitments and critical activities, blocking, batching, and buffering.

I'm convinced that most of us work in the evening and on the weekend because we allow ourselves to, rather than working during the day, really working—instead of being distracted by unimportant activities—and sprinting through the finish line at the end of the day.

And don't be fooled by the fact that the consequences of violating these hard stops are not immediately experienced, like missing a flight or being penalized on your taxes.

Consequences still exist.

"Weekends are what stand between you and a smoldering burnout," writes Laura Vanderkam in *What the Most Successful People Do on the Weekend.* "Success in a competitive world requires hitting Monday refreshed and ready to go. The only way to do that is to create weekends that rejuvenate you rather than exhaust or disappoint you."

Here's how I create weekends that rejuvenate me.

First, I schedule a time block on Friday afternoon where I batch a series of administrative activities related to my consulting practice. I put my head down and plow through these tasks, so they don't hang over my head on the weekend or spill over to the next week.

Then I set a hard stop for the weekend. Sometimes it's 3:00 PM, but often it's 5:00 PM. Either way, my workweek is over for the next two and a half days, until Monday at 8:00 AM. What do I do during that time? I rest, relax, and reconnect with the ones I love.

Weekends like this take a bit of coordination, but they're well worth it. In other words, binging on Netflix won't renew your soul, but pursuing your favorite hobby will (Remember what hobbies are?). So will dinner and drinks with family and friends, taking a glorious nap, reading a good novel, attending church, and going on a meandering walk.

Now you can wake up on Monday morning, not dreading the upcoming week but energized and refreshed to meet the challenges ahead.

Google's productivity expert, Laura Mae Martin, writes in her book *Uptime*, "The process of identifying, protecting, and improving the quality of your downtime is crucial to maintaining the creativity that fuels your work." There's no uptime without downtime!

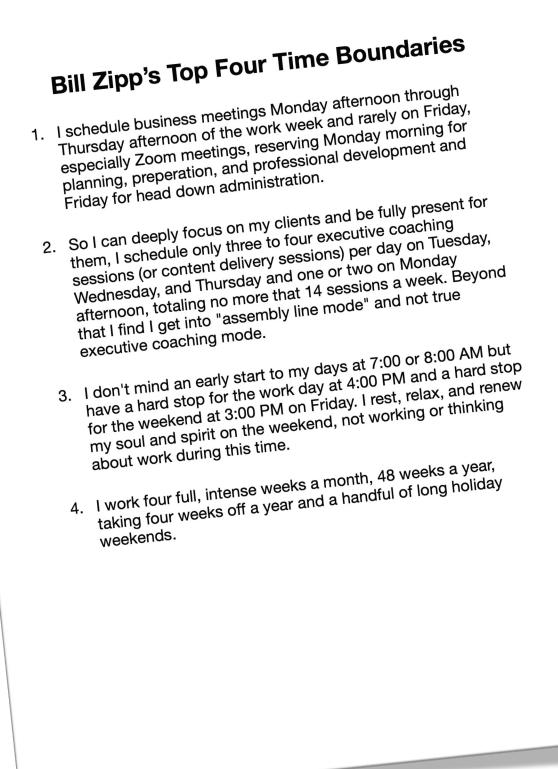
This practice has not come easy to me. I can be super intense and super-driven, but one day the consequence Laura Vanderkam writes about became true of me: smoldering burnout. There's no leading like a laser, or any leading at all, if there's no energy for the light, and I learned the hard way to protect my evenings and weekends.

Finally, weekends need a plan for when a true work emergency occurs. We all live in the real world where real emergencies happen any time of the day or night. Prepare yourself with a strategic intervention when they do, preserving, at least, most of the weekend. Make sure, however, that this is a true emergency and that it happens rarely.



### **Journaling Exercise Five**

- 1. What is your end of the day hard stop? How will you stay true to that boundary and maintain the health of your home, family, and self?
- 2. What is your end of the week hard stop? Schedule a time block on Friday where you put your head down and get the natty details of the week done before your weekend hard stop.
- 3. Make a list of all the fun things you and your family love to do. Schedule two or three of these each weekend for the next month (or the rest of the year). Now do them with abandon!
- 4. Review everything you considered in this eBook and draft four to five time boundaries you'll follow moving forward (See example on the next page). Who do you need to share these with? How will you stay true to them?





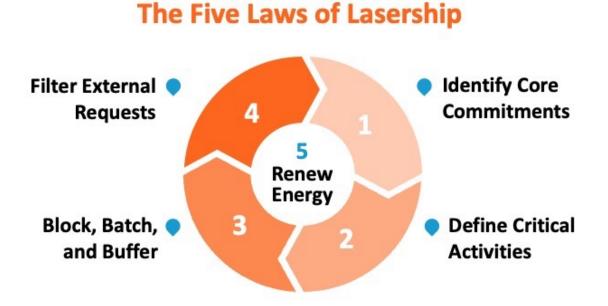
I'm convinced that there's no greater challenge for leaders right now than managing the overwhelming demands on our time.

And I'm convinced that the traditional approach to time management doesn't work any more. No amount of efficiency will allow us to get done what we need to get done today.

So finally, I'm convinced that there's a better approach to the entire topic, one that's not an inch deep and mile wide, but an inch wide and one, two, and three miles deep.

Here it is: Identify your core commitments. Define the critical activities that flow from them. Block, batch, and buffer. Learn how to say no positively and professionally and renew your limited energy on the evenings and the weekends.

With these you will cut diamonds.



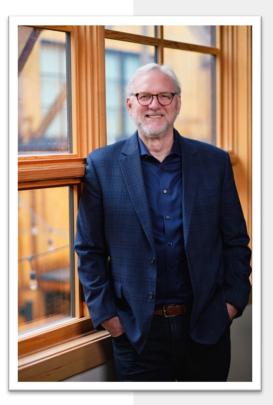
# About the Author

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Author, speaker, and executive coach, Bill Zipp helps hardworking executives become better leaders, grow their people, and hit their number.

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