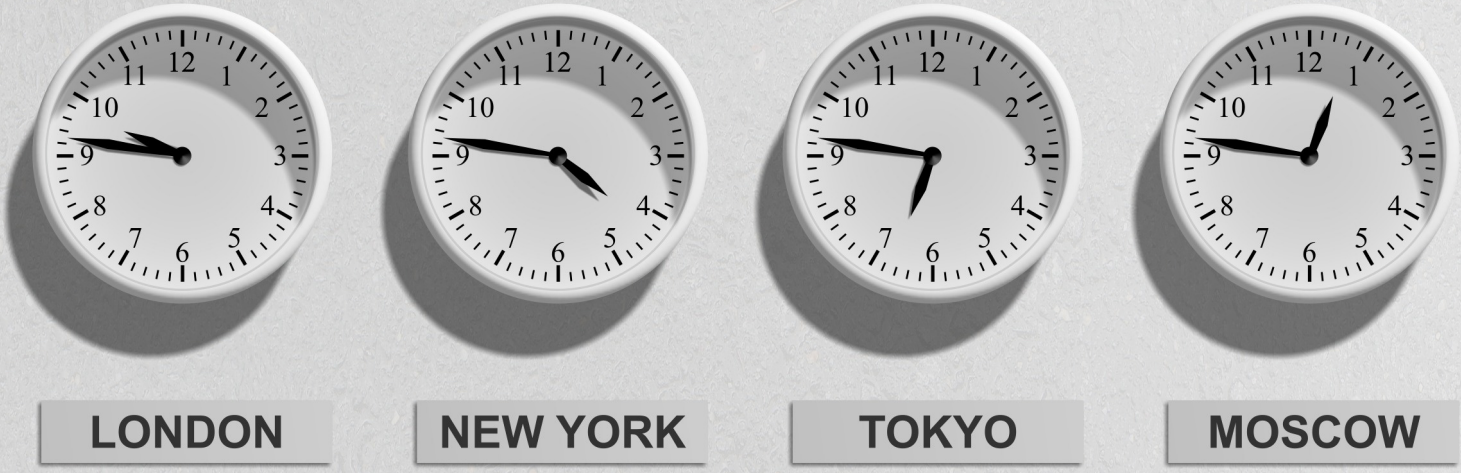

PRIME
CHIEF OF STAFF

JUNE 2020

How the Chief of Staff can Improve Executive Effectiveness

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Introduction by our CEO

Over the past decade, the Chief of Staff role has increasingly become a more formalized position within private sector organizations. As this role continues to take shape, its impact must also be better understood.

Unlike a Chief Marketing Officer or Head of Human Resources, Chiefs of Staff do not typically manage entire departments of an organization, so accountability and success of the role cannot be tied to their performance. Nevertheless, a tie to something must exist to understand its purpose and impact.

We believe the success of a Chief of Staff is most closely tied to effectiveness.

Effectiveness is a broad term much like the Chief of Staff role itself. While effectiveness can relate to individuals, teams, and entire organizations, this white paper aims to better expose specific ways a Chief of Staff improves effectiveness of the executive.

Catherine Berardi

Catherine Berardi

CEO, PRIME CHIEF OF STAFF

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The Long and Short of Executive Effectiveness

"**Being effective"** is a phrase used loosely today. We are always seeking to be more effective and to make our teams more effective. Yet, there is still much to explore about what effectiveness really means. It seems to be a largely understudied construct in business and in published research, which both tend to favor performance – a more tangible and measurable construct that can, quite literally, amount to dollars and cents. Nevertheless, if performance is the *what* that we seek from organizations, we believe that effectiveness is the *how*.

Much of what we studied on the topic of effectiveness comes from the aptly titled book, The Effective Executive, originally published in 1967 by Peter Drucker, a well-known management consultant, educator, and author. Though Drucker passed away in 2005, many of his theories and ideologies remain. The Effective Executive aims to address executive effectiveness perhaps better than any other published work on the topic, so this is where our research began.

While team and organization effectiveness are important elements of driving performance in organizations, we believe effectiveness must first stem from individuals, and more specifically, executives. Drucker states it best in his 1985 updated preface,

> *"[T]he effectiveness of the individual depends increasingly on his or her ability to be effective in the organization, to be effective as an executive. And the effectiveness of a modern society and its ability to perform…depend increasingly on the effectiveness of the people who work as executives in the organizations."*

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So, what is effectiveness? “Getting the right things done” may be the simplest way to say it, but in application, effectiveness is comprised of several elements. In Drucker’s words: “Effectiveness…is a complex of practices.” Drucker further explains five practices of executive effectiveness, summarized as: knowing where time goes; focusing on results; building on strengths; concentrating on top priorities; and, making strong decisions.

While these five practices appraise effectiveness well, we venture to add one more: promoting communication. To be fair to Drucker, the importance of communication is addressed in his book, but he chooses not to call it out as a separate practice. Yet, given the increasing complexity of organizations and the more remote environment in which we now work, we believe the importance of promoting strong communication deserves its own light. Communication, in these terms, is not simply referring to sermonized messaging from the leader, but rather, the act of creating better channels for communication, information, and knowledge sharing across the organization.

Like most things reduced to a handful of bullets, reaching optimal effectiveness is not as easy as it appears. Many of the realities of organizations consistently keep us from being effective. The most elusive of these six practices, from our experience partnering with top executives, is the understanding and protection of time. Time is a finite resource. We all get the same amount and we cannot manufacture more.

Only **9%** *of executives are highly satisfied with how they spend their time.*

It is why management consulting firms like McKinsey spend time studying time. McKinsey found, unsurprisngly, that only 9 percent of executives are highly satisfied with how they spend their time. Without effective use of time other effectiveness practices also suffer. For example, the same McKinsey study found that only half of executives believed their time matched their organization’s priorities.

The good news about these sobering statistics is that improvements can be made. Effectiveness can be learned through deliberate action. While learning any practice begins with the individual, other people can help. For example, executive coaches, board members, and peers can improve executive effectiveness—and arguably no other person can more directly do so than the Chief of Staff.

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The Role of a Chief of Staff

The role of Chief of Staff is more commonplace now than ever before. What once started as a role in military and government has now transcended every industry and sector. Just a decade ago, little attention was given to the role.

Today... there are likely more than

60,000 *Chiefs of Staff across the globe.*

We now see a rise in articles attempting to define and describe the role of a Chief of Staff, but a one-size-fits-all definition is difficult – much like effectiveness – and for similar reason. The Chief of Staff role is comprised of six functions, all of which are meant to help executives, teams, and organizations remain focused on strategic priorities.

Chiefs of Staff are often known as the ultimate protectors of executive time. They find efficient and productive ways to keep an executive's time balanced on the right mix of activities, focused around top priorities, and well-managed with the support of administrative staff. With this in mind, it becomes easier to see how a Chief of Staff may improve executive effectiveness.

While better use of time solves part of the effectiveness puzzle, it does not complete it. Executives who use their time effectively can still be ineffective in how they make decisions, for example. Therefore, we outline in the table below the ways in which a Chief of Staff can serve to improve effectiveness across each of the six effectiveness practices. Additionally, and often most importantly, we include tangible ways to measure success.

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Table 1. Ways The Chief of Staff Can Improve Executive Effectiveness

Effectiveness Practice	Executive Challenge	Chief of Staff Solution	Success Metric
KNOW WHERE TIME GOES	• Inadequate time spent on strategy • Too much time spent in the wrong areas • Time is directed by the organization, not the executive	• Re-allocates time through doing, delegating, deferring, or dropping work that is not strategic • Communicates where executive's time should be spent to key stakeholders	• Time audits conducted on a regular cadence • Stakeholder understanding of where executive time should be spent • Executive satisfaction
FOCUS ON RESULTS	• Output is favored over outcomes • Executive is too "in the weeds"	• Ensures completion of company priorities • Redirects executive attention, as needed • Improves executive office operations toward outcomes	• Strategic priority or KPI completion rates • Organizational performance metrics
PROMOTE COMMUNICATION	• Believes communication is top-down • Fails to communicate regularly • Only communicates after changes are made	• Bridges team communication and collaboration for more knowledge sharing • Ensures messaging is received throughout organization	• Strategic priority or KPI completion rates • Employee engagement scores and feedback
BUILD ON STRENGTHS	• Lack of awareness • Strengths are not properly utilized • Strengths are not well-managed	• Covers executive blind spots with differing strengths that mitigate weaknesses • Conducts strengths assessment for broader understanding of team strengths and how to best manage them	• Strengths assessment completion and adoption • Executive satisfaction • Employee engagement scores and feedback
CONCENTRATE ON TOP PRIORITIES	• The wrong priorities are set • Focus is not on priorities • Priorities are not being completed	• Prepares and facilitates strategic planning process • Develops and implements strategic framework for accountability and alignment • Leads or co-leads strategic initiatives	• Feedback on strategic planning process • Implementation and adoption of strategic framework • Strategic priority or KPI completion rates
MAKE STRONG DECISIONS	• Decisions are made too rashly • Implications are not understood before decisions are made • Indecision	• Gathers additional perspectives from team to understand implications • Advises executive for sounder decision making	• Executive performance feedback • Post-mortem feedback • Engagement scores and feedback

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There are two points to make regarding this view of the Chief of Staff role and executive effectiveness.

First, the table above (**Table 1**) is a guide and by no means exhaustive of all capabilities of a Chief of Staff. And some Chiefs do not serve in all of these capacities because other roles may do so. For example, a company's Chief Strategy Officer may be charged with aligning the organization to its strategic priorities instead of the Chief of Staff.

Nevertheless, a Chief of Staff should serve only as part of the solution for executive effectiveness. It takes commitment from the executive above all else and, for optimal impact, it also requires alignment from the executive team, support from the administrative staff, and more. There is no silver bullet to improving effectiveness, but the Chief of Staff role provides a significant head start.

There is no silver bullet to improving effectiveness, but the Chief of Staff role provides a

a significant head start.

Improving Your Effectiveness as an Executive

If any effectiveness challenges resonate or currently afflict you as an executive, it is important to understand that solutions exist that can help. One of those solutions may be hiring a Chief of Staff. If you are considering a Chief of Staff role, it is important to begin by understanding that identifying effectiveness challenges is not the only consideration to ensure a successful hire. Many other factors need to be considered, including organizational talent, structure, and norms. The Chief of Staff role will likely fail or be largely unsuccessful if these broader considerations are not made.

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About Prime Chief of Staff

Prime Chief of Staff can help. For over six years, our company has supported a variety of organizations across every industry in assessing the viability of the Chief of Staff role, properly defining the position, and finding exceptional talent to fill these unique roles. Further, we develop Chiefs of Staff through onboarding and coaching programs for lasting success. Our team is comprised of former Chiefs of Staff with firsthand knowledge and experience to consult with you and your team about your needs.

Contact us to learn more about how a Chief of Staff can improve your effectiveness and begin an assessment today.

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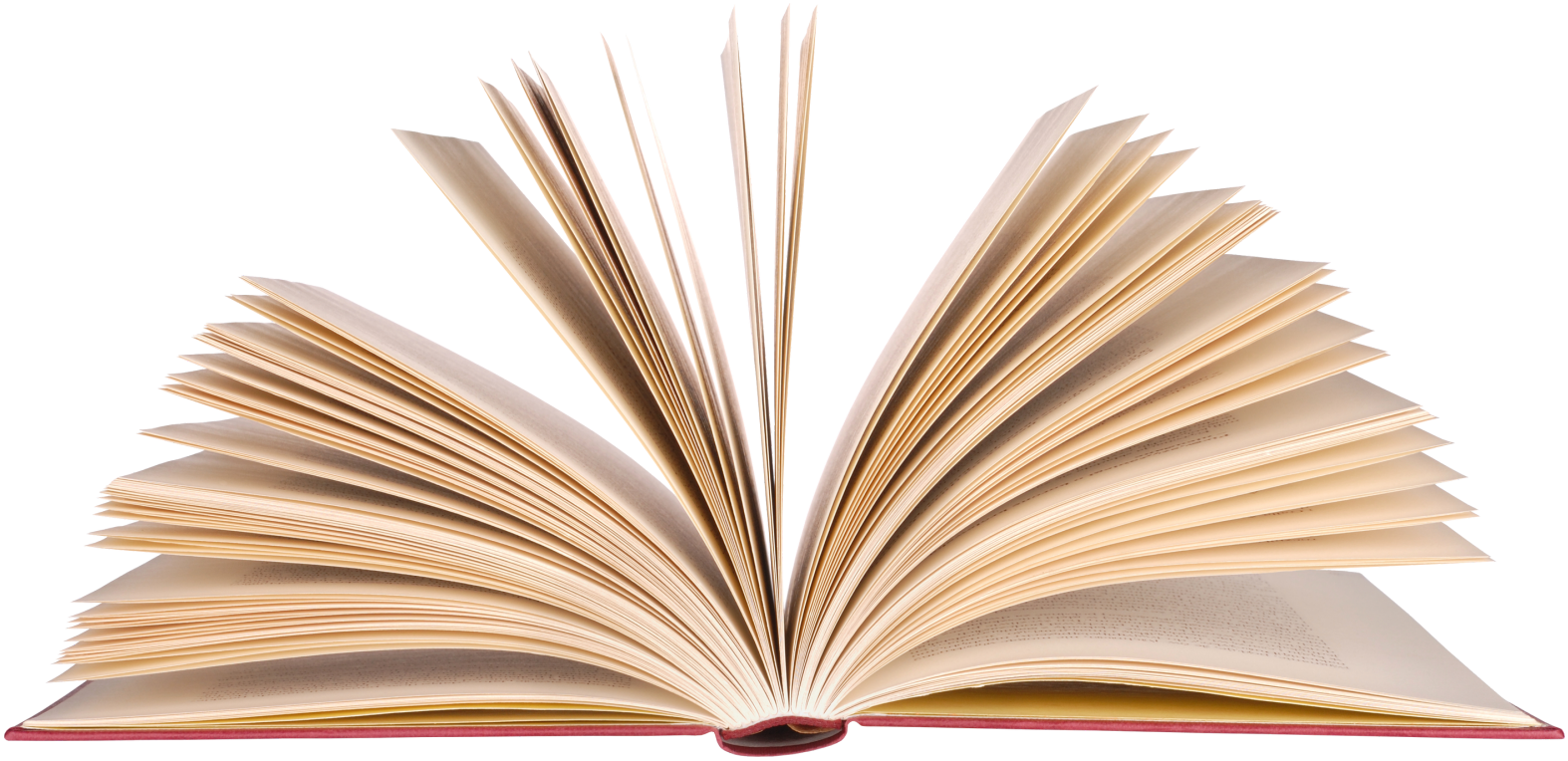

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