

BUILD THE ENGINE

The Principal Priority Filter™

A free leadership tool for calendar, attention, and priority alignment

Your calendar reveals your leadership priorities.



New principals do not simply have a time problem. They have an attention and priority problem. This filter helps leaders decide what to protect, what to limit, what to delegate, and what needs a stronger system.

Core question

Does your calendar reflect your vision?

This Is Not Time Management

Most leadership resources tell principals to manage their calendars. Build the Engine asks a better question: does your calendar reflect your vision?

If your calendar is full but your priorities are not moving, the problem is not your work ethic. The engine is misaligned.

The Principal's Problem

- Fires will always exist.
- Urgency can sound more important than it is.
- A full calendar can hide unclear priorities.
- If everything needs the principal, the system is not strong enough yet.

The Build the Engine Shift

- Protect the work that moves instruction.
- Build rhythms so priorities happen repeatedly.
- Use data to decide what needs attention.
- Coach people instead of carrying everything yourself.

The Five Alignment Questions

- Vision: What matters most right now?
- Leadership Rhythms: When will the most important work happen?
- Coaching: Who am I developing this week?
- Data: What evidence should drive my decisions?
- Systems: What can run without me?

New Principal Example: Do / Do Not

DO THIS

Write the reset: 'Walkthroughs move to Tuesday 8:30. Dean owns first discipline triage. I review patterns at 2:30.' The priority did not disappear; it got protected.

DO NOT DO THIS

Erase the walkthrough block, handle every discipline issue yourself, and tell yourself you will get into classrooms tomorrow.

Let Me Walk You Through It

Do not use this tool like another form to complete. Use it like a pause in the middle of the day. Sit with the request, name what is true, and decide the next right leadership move.

When something lands on your desk, slow it down for 60 seconds. Ask: Is this mine? Is this urgent? Is this aligned? Is this a pattern? Then make one clear move.

If a Request Hits

- Step 1: Name the request in one sentence.
- Step 2: Run the five filter questions.
- Step 3: Decide protect, limit, delegate, or systematize.
- Step 4: Name the owner and deadline.
- Step 5: Tell the person what will happen next.

Say This

'This matters, but I need to put the right owner on it. Here is what will happen next: _____. I will check back on _____.'

If the Day Got Away

- Step 1: Name what pulled you away.
- Step 2: Move the priority block, do not erase it.
- Step 3: Assign one repeated interruption to an owner.
- Step 4: Build a small routine before it repeats.
- Step 5: Tell your team what is still protected.

If Your Team Is Drifting

- Step 1: Name the drift without blame.
- Step 2: Ask where the priority lives on the calendar.
- Step 3: Ask what evidence they will bring back.
- Step 4: Remove or delegate one distraction.
- Step 5: Schedule the follow-up before you leave.

You are not trying to control every minute. You are teaching the school what matters by what you protect, monitor, delegate, and return to.

The Priority Filter

Use this before saying yes, adding a meeting, taking back a task, or letting a fire take over the day. Start with the request, answer the questions, then choose the leadership move.

Step 1: Ask Before You Say Yes

- | | | |
|--|-----|----|
| ☐ Does this align to our school vision? | YES | NO |
| ☐ Does this improve student outcomes or adult practice? | YES | NO |
| ☐ Does this strengthen instruction, people, or systems? | YES | NO |
| ☐ Am I the right person to own this? | YES | NO |
| ☐ What happens if this does not happen today? | YES | NO |

Step 2A: If Mostly Yes

- Protect it.
- Schedule it intentionally.
- Name the evidence you expect to see.
- Tell the right people why it matters.

Step 2B: If Mostly No

- Limit it.
- Delegate it.
- Turn it into a system.
- Say no or not now with clarity.

STEP 3: ONE PRIORITY I NEED TO PROTECT THIS WEEK

New Principal Example: Do / Do Not DO THIS

Say: 'The dean will make the first call by 2:00. I will help the dean prepare the message, then we will review the pattern Friday.'

DO NOT DO THIS

Take every parent call first because you want families to feel heard, then teach everyone that the principal is the first responder.

The Leadership Leverage Matrix

Do not ask only, 'How busy am I?' Ask, 'What creates the greatest leadership leverage?'

MOVE	EXAMPLES	WHY IT MATTERS
Protect	Walkthroughs, dean coaching check-ins, data huddles, first-30-day priorities	High impact and aligned to the engine.
Limit	Email refreshes, low-value meetings, open-door interruptions, loose check-ins	Necessary at times, but they should not own the day.
Delegate	Supply orders, first drafts, routine parent updates, coverage checks	Builds capacity and reduces principal dependency.
Systematize	Repeated discipline calls, late buses, hallway gaps, unclear dismissal routines	Recurring fires usually need a system, not more principal hustle.
If the same crisis keeps showing up, it may not be a crisis anymore. It may be a system asking to be built.		

Matrix Used Right and Wrong

The matrix only works when the principal uses it to make a decision. It is not a label. It is a leadership move.

Parent concern about math instruction

RIGHT Coach: help the dean prepare the parent response, review classroom evidence, and set the dean's follow-up date.

WRONG Take the call back, promise the parent you will personally fix it, and skip the dean coaching moment.

Repeated hallway behavior after lunch

RIGHT Systematize: assign hallway zones, set a two-day evidence check, and review patterns Friday.

WRONG Treat each incident like a brand-new emergency and keep pulling students one by one.

Teacher asks for help with routines

RIGHT Coach: help the dean plan the observation, rehearse the feedback, and name what evidence the dean brings back.

WRONG Coach the teacher directly every time and leave the dean watching instead of learning how to lead it.

Email thread keeps expanding

RIGHT Limit: pause the thread, name the decision owner, and set one 15-minute meeting if needed.

WRONG Keep replying because silence feels rude, then lose planning time.

If the matrix does not change your calendar, your owner, your follow-up, or your boundary, you only named the problem. You did not lead the next move yet.

The Engine Calendar Audit

Look at one week of your calendar. Do not judge it. Study it. Your calendar is evidence.

Color-Code Your Week



Instruction



Coaching



Planning



Data



People



Operations



Crisis Response

What the Calendar Reveals

WHICH COLOR DOMINATES THE WEEK?

WHERE DID INSTRUCTION AND COACHING APPEAR?

WHAT PRIORITY DID I SAY MATTERED BUT DID NOT SCHEDULE?

WHAT KEPT RETURNING BECAUSE THE SYSTEM IS WEAK?

WHAT NEEDS TO BE PROTECTED BEFORE THE WEEK BEGINS?

If red keeps growing, do not just work harder. Ask what system, expectation, routine, or adult support would reduce the fire next time.

New Principal Example: Do / Do Not

DO THIS

Name the evidence: 'My week says I responded more than I led instruction.' Protect two walkthrough blocks and add one Friday data review.

DO NOT DO THIS

Defend the calendar by saying, 'It was just a busy week,' without changing what will happen next week.

A Two-Week Calendar That Still Leads

This calendar is not perfect. Time still gets away. The difference is the principal moves the priority, names owners, and returns to evidence.

The labels show the leadership move: protect, coach, data, operations, crisis, or rebalance.

Mon

PROTECT

8:30 walkthroughs

COACH

1:00 dean feedback prep

OPS

3:30 email window

Tue

DATA

8:30 grade data

CRISIS

10:45 parent concern

REBAL

dean owns first call

Wed

COACH

9:15 dean teacher plan

PROTECT

11:00 planning block

OPS

2:00 family call log

Thu

PROTECT

8:30 make-up walkthroughs

COACH

10:30 dean triage

DATA

2:00 pattern check

Fri

DATA

9:00 evidence review

PROTECT

1:00 dashboard protect next week

REBAL

Mon

PROTECT

9:00 walkthroughs

COACH

1:15 dean evidence return

OPS

3:20 email

Tue

DATA

8:45 huddle

OPS

AP owns coverage plan

COACH

2:00 dean parent script

Wed

PROTECT

8:30 planning

COACH

11:00 dean new-teacher plan

OPS

2:30 staff message

Thu

PROTECT

8:30 walkthroughs

DATA

10:15 hallway evidence

REBAL

adjust lunch system

Fri

DATA

9:00 compare evidence

COACH

11:00 celebrate growth

PROTECT

1:00 next priority

What This Shows

Instruction is moved, not erased.

Urgent issues go through the right leadership lane.

Evidence comes back on Friday.

The principal protects what matters out loud.

Say: 'Tuesday got away from me, but walkthroughs still matter. They are moving to Thursday at 8:30, and I am checking the pattern Friday.'

A Two-Week Calendar That Shows Drift

This calendar looks busy, but the priorities are invisible. The principal is working hard, but the engine is not aligned.

Mon DRIFT Inbox before students CRISIS discipline all morning DRIFT walkthroughs skipped	Tue OPS unclear meeting CRISIS parent calls taken back DRIFT dean not coached	Wed CRISIS coverage issue OPS supply requests DRIFT try walkthroughs tomorrow	Thu OPS meeting about meeting CRISIS hallway issue DRIFT no follow-up	Fri OPS forms and email DRIFT 'crazy week' reflection DRIFT no calendar reset
Mon DRIFT starts with email CRISIS same hallway pattern DRIFT dean coaching canceled	Tue OPS open-door questions CRISIS principal takes parent call DRIFT data huddle missed	Wed DRIFT late to classrooms OPS coverage texts DRIFT no evidence collected	Thu CRISIS discipline repeats DRIFT principal handles all OPS email at night	Fri DRIFT no priority review OPS calendar fills itself DRIFT same week repeats

What Staff Learn

- Everything is urgent, so nothing is protected.
- Deans wait for the principal to solve issues they should learn to lead.
- Instruction gets talked about but not led.
- No one brings evidence back because no return date exists.

This is not a character flaw. It is a system warning. The fix is not to hustle harder. The fix is to protect one priority, name one owner, and return to one piece of evidence.

Principal Scenarios: Done Right and Wrong

Use these like practice. Read the situation, decide the move, and listen for the difference between carrying the work and leading the work.

Scenario 1

The new teacher is struggling with transitions.

DONE RIGHT

Right: coach the dean to observe, rehearse the transition feedback, and bring back evidence in two days.

DONE WRONG

Wrong: bypass the dean, coach the teacher yourself, and leave the dean without practice.

Scenario 2

The dean brings every discipline issue to you.

DONE RIGHT

Right: coach the dean on level-one triage, set what comes to you, and review the pattern Friday.

DONE WRONG

Wrong: take the students, solve the moment, and teach the dean that you are the system.

Scenario 3

A leadership meeting ends with no decisions.

DONE RIGHT

Right: stop and ask, "Who owns this, by when, and what evidence comes back?"

DONE WRONG

Wrong: schedule another meeting because the conversation felt unfinished.

Scenario 4

A family concern interrupts your coaching block.

DONE RIGHT

Right: help the dean prepare the first response, keep or move the dean coaching block, and review the follow-up.

DONE WRONG

Wrong: take the family call yourself and cancel the coaching time that would build the dean.

Before you answer the next request, ask yourself: Am I about to own this, coach this, delegate this, limit this, or build a system around this?

The Friday Priority Dashboard

Use this at the end of the week. The goal is not guilt. The goal is alignment.

Six Friday Questions

WHAT MOVED STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT OR ADULT PRACTICE?

WHO DID I COACH OR DEVELOP?

WHAT SYSTEM BECAME STRONGER?

WHAT DISTRACTED ME FROM THE REAL PRIORITY?

WHAT WILL I STOP, DELEGATE, COACH, OR OWN NEXT WEEK?

WHAT IS THE ONE LEADERSHIP MOVE I NEED TO PROTECT FIRST?

Next week, I will protect the work that most clearly moves our vision forward.

New Principal Example: Do / Do Not

DO THIS

Write a real Friday answer: 'I coached two deans, moved two hallway adults, and email interrupted planning. Next week: email at 10:30/3:30; AP owns coverage texts.'

DO NOT DO THIS

Write a vague reflection like, 'This week was crazy,' then start Monday without changing the calendar, owner, or routine.

When the Day Gets Away From You

Every new principal will have days when the calendar breaks. The goal is not to pretend it did not happen. The goal is to rebalance quickly before one bad day becomes the rhythm of the week.

When the day gets away from you, do not start by blaming the day. Study what pulled you away and decide what needs a boundary, a routine, or a different owner.

The 10-Minute Reset

- Name what took over the day.
- Decide what still must happen today.
- Move one priority block before the week ends.
- Identify the repeated interruption.
- Ask: does this need my attention, a system, or another owner?

The 30-Minute Friday Rebalance

- Look at what actually happened this week.
- Protect one instructional or coaching block for next week.
- Cancel, shorten, or delegate one low-leverage item.
- Tell your team what you are protecting and why.
- Build one routine to reduce the same fire next time.

New Principal Example: Do / Do Not

DO THIS

Say: 'Tuesday walkthroughs moved to Thursday 8:30-9:15. Dean owns the first family response. Dean triages level-one discipline. I review patterns Friday.' Rebalance means move the priority and fix the pattern.

DO NOT DO THIS

Say: 'I will try again next week,' but leave the same open calendar, same interruption pattern, and same principal-owned response system in place.

Today got away from me, but the priority still matters. I am moving it, not abandoning it. The pattern I need to fix is this: ____.

Coach Others on Priority

A principal's priority management is not private. The people who report to the principal can see when the work is scattered, when follow-up is inconsistent, and when no one is watching the priority anymore.

Why This Matters

When the principal drifts, the team often drifts too. Not because people do not care, but because adults take their cues from what leaders monitor, protect, ask about, and follow up on.

Coach With Four Questions

- What is the priority you are protecting this week?
- Where is it on your calendar?
- What evidence will show it happened?
- What needs to be stopped, delegated, coached, or owned?

What Principals Should Watch

- Leaders cancelling coaching blocks repeatedly.
- Teams meeting without decisions or owners.
- People waiting for the principal to solve routine issues.
- Priorities named in meetings but absent from follow-up.

New Principal Example: Do / Do Not

DO THIS

Coach it clearly: 'Put hallway follow-up on Tuesday/Thursday at 10:10. Bring 5 notes and one pattern by Friday. Stop supply questions during that block. I check in Friday at 1:00.'

DO NOT DO THIS

Take the hallway work back, complain that follow-up is not happening, or say 'make this a priority' without a calendar block, evidence, and return date.

I am not asking you to do more. I am asking you to protect the right work. If this priority matters, where will it live, what will you monitor, and when will you bring back evidence?

Stop. Delegate. Coach. Own.

Everything on the principal's plate needs a decision. Leaving it unnamed is how the day starts owning you.

STOP

Do: leave a meeting where no decision needs you. Do not: sit there because you were invited.

MY EXAMPLE THIS WEEK

DELEGATE

Do: ask an AP for the coverage draft by noon. Do not: redo it yourself at 5:00.

MY EXAMPLE THIS WEEK

COACH

Do: rehearse the parent-call script with the dean. Do not: take the call back.

MY EXAMPLE THIS WEEK

OWN

Do: name the 30-day instructional priority. Do not: let urgency choose it for you.

MY EXAMPLE THIS WEEK

Priority management is not about doing more. It is about protecting the leadership work that makes the school stronger when you are not in the room.

Your Next Move

Choose one protected leadership block for next week. Put it on your calendar before the week starts. Then protect it like the vision depends on it, because it does.