Social Copy | Sam Corcos, CEO, Levels

Short posts

V1

I spent 7922 hours building @Levels over the last two years. One action had the biggest impact on my time management and mental health than any other:

Killing my to-do list.

The problem with to-do lists is they make you overly optimistic about how much you can accomplish. Lists make you feel good in the moment but as soon as you put the pen down, anxiety starts.

Your to-do list is killing you. So ditch the list and do this instead:

1. Take everything on your to-do list with the dates you think they'll get done by.
2. Put them on your calendar with the amount of time you think it's going to take.
3. If a task that needs to be completed pops up, go to your calendar and block off time for that task.

Your calendar is now your to-do list. It doesn't have to be any more complicated than that.

@TimFerriss just published our chat where I breakdown exactly how you can make the transition from to-do list to calendar.

Link is in the comments.

V2

I invested 7922 hours in @levels over the last two years. As a four-time founder and advisor to heaps of early-stage startups, here are the three signs your time management is stifling your impact and growth as a CEO:

1. You have action items and deliverables assigned that you aren't handing off.
2. You use a to-do list instead of a calendar for task management.

3. You let recency determine priority.

Let's walk through each:

Your only deliverable is unlocking others

Your primary job as a CEO is to be an information router. If you find that you regularly have action items and deliverables that you can't hand off to other people, it either means:

a) You don't trust your team enough to delegate.
b) You need to hire someone with the skills needed to execute.

If you're too focused on your own deliverables, you're at risk of missing the forest for the trees.

Your to-do list is killing you

The problem with to-do lists is they make you overly optimistic about how much you can accomplish.

Kill it and use your calendar instead:

a) Take everything on your to-do list with the dates you think they'll get done by.
b) Put them on your calendar with the amount of time you think it's going to take.
c) If a task that needs to be completed pops up, go to your calendar and block off time for that task.

Your calendar is the to-do list. It doesn't have to be any more complicated than that.

Recency ≠ priority

Your job as a CEO is to build fire departments, not put out fires.

If you're regularly putting out fires and getting interrupted by seemingly urgent tasks that come into your inbox, you're doing it wrong.

To distinguish between urgent and non-urgent problems, ask yourself:
If in a year we looked back on this decision, is this the decision that killed the company?

The answer is usually no. So hand things off to someone else or kill the project entirely.

Long post

V1

It took Michelangelo 4 years to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Over those 4 years, he averaged 18-hour work days. That's 26,280 hours. On one project.

But when did he see his kids? His Family? His friends?

He never had any kids. Or a romantic relationship. Ever. He was a recluse.

And since none of us are the second coming of Michelangelo and we have families and friends and kids and jobs and the internet, it's even more important for us to spend our time wisely.

Especially if we want to make a few BIG things in our lifetimes. I honestly believe that you can't be a great CEO without being a master of time management.

Confession: I started tracking my time religiously after discovering that I used to burn 3+ hours per day on social media and news.

And in the last two years, I averaged 80 hours/week – 7922 hours to be precise – building @Levels. In the spirit of the two-year anniversary of Levels, here are 8 lessons about time management that I wish someone had told me as a first-time CEO:

1. **Your to-do list is killing you.** Use your calendar as a to-do list instead to get a clearer view of your time and priorities.

2. **Your main job as a CEO is being an information router.** I spent an average of 34 hours per week on information processing. Around 90% of this time is email. Block off recurring blocks of time every day to process email in order to stay on top of communication.

3. **You don't need to have 1:1s with all your direct reports.** I only have 1-2 meetings per week and only meet with my co-founder twice a month. Constantly reassess whether a meeting is adding value and change cadences to see if it makes any difference.

4. **Your job as a CEO is to build fire departments, not put out fires.** If you're regularly putting out fires yourself, you're doing it wrong. Focus your time on how to enable others on your team to put out fires themselves.

5. **You're probably not spending enough time recruiting.** I expected that I was spending about 20% of my time on recruiting, but the reality is that I only spent about 3% of my time on it. If recruiting is a priority for you (and it should be), it might be worth auditing your time to make sure you're spending at least 20% of your time (post-traction) as @jasonlemkin recommends.

6. **Understanding your customers takes more time than you think.** There's no shortcut here. The only way to learn who your customers are and deeply understand what problems you can solve is to hear their stories first-hand.

7. **Writing good documentation often takes a lot less time than you think.** While writing a memo might only take 30-60 minutes, it usually feels like it took much longer. Block off time in your calendar well in advance for things like writing. I often block off the entire week on my calendar 2-3 months in advance.

8. **You're probably spending a lot less time on strategy than you think you are.** I was surprised to see just how little time I actually spent on strategy (5.4%). If strategy is important to you (which it should be as the CEO), you might want to consider reallocating your time to make strategy more of a priority.

If you want to take back your time for your work, I created a (simplified) version of the spreadsheet that I use myself. Make a copy and use it for yourself [INSERT LINK].

You owe it to yourself and your business.

V2

I invested 7922 hours into my company @Levels over the last two years. 10 unconventional lessons I learned about time management as a fourth-time founder and first-time CEO.

One thing stood out.

But first, here's how the math shakes out:

- Engineering
- Sales and Marketing
- Operations
- Strategy
- Investor Relations

- Recruiting
- Team
- Information Processing
- Network

Out of the 10 areas I tracked obsessively, can you guess which two took up over 50% of my time?

You're probably thinking recruiting and strategy. I anticipated the same.

Turns out, only 10% of my time went to recruiting and strategy.

So, take back your time *and* your passion for your work — you owe it to yourself and your business.

Rough work

Sam Corcos

- 4x founder, first time non-technical CEO
- 2-year anniv of Levels (current co)
- Obsessive about time tracking (tracking 15-min increments religiously for years using Rescue Time)
- Tracking time gives quick pulse on whether enough attention is being given to critical areas of business
- This article isn't an optimistic or sanitized take on how I'd like to spend my time; it's an unvarnished look at how I actually spent my time over the last two years
- Biggest surprises from deeply analyzing the data — and what it says about the ever-changing role of a startup CEO
- **Biggest surprises**
- **Common traps** other CEOs fall into that are stifling impact on growth
    - Using a to-do list
    - Not blocking off time to process email
    - Focusing on your own deliverables/not delegating
    - Letting recency determine priority
- **Tested tactics** for implementing your own system for optimizing your time as CEO
- **Takeaways**:
    - Takeaway: Depending on where your company is in its lifecycle, you might find yourself doing individual contributor (IC) work. And that's okay! Be humble and recognize that sometimes that's where you can add the most value.
    - There's no shortcut here. The only way to learn who your customers are and deeply understand what problems you can solve for them is to hear their stories first-hand.

Takeaway #1: It's okay to build systems that are not scalable in the early days. The goal is to learn what's working and what's not. Spreadsheets and Google Forms are great places to start. We didn't have a proper database set up until a year after we started the company.

Takeaway #2: As a startup CEO, you have to be good (but not necessarily great) at everything. It's a huge asset to the company to be able to jump in and contribute to every part of the company.

> It's easy to miss the forest for the trees when you're building a company. Taking some time off is a great way to gain a new perspective.

Takeaway #1: You're probably spending a lot less time on strategy than you think you are. If strategy is important to you (which it should be, as the CEO), you might want to consider reallocating your time to make strategy more of a priority.

Takeaway #2: Writing out your strategy in long form not only has the benefit of forcing you to think deeply about your company, but it also has the bonus of gaining alignment from your team. To paraphrase a recent conversation with one of our new hires, "I feel like I know more about Levels and the team after working here for two weeks than I did at my last company after working there for five years."

Takeaway #3: Going largely offline for a Think Week is a great forcing function to think deeply about strategy and crank out a lot of written content.

> Use content to scale your time. Unless you enjoy taking calls to repeatedly answer questions like, “What’s the TAM?”, “What are the customer personas?” and “What’s your go-to-market strategy?” you should try to solve this by writing those ideas down and sharing the written content. I guarantee it will save you time in the fundraising process — and it has the added benefit of sharing context with everyone on your team!

Long

Now that Levels is at 50+ employees, we're running into new organizational challenges, including performance management, focus, and cross-functional team dynamics.

I had a conversation with Aaron Dignan, author of Brave New Work, to think through some of these challenges with intentional org design. Some takeaways 👇

1/ Team arrangement comes first
Productivity comes from identifying job sets and arranging them into appropriate teams with the right goals, responsibilities, and decision-making authority.

2/ The team’s charter sets its own objectives
From there, ultimately it’s the team’s charter that determines its own objectives and serves as the primary indicator of whether or not we’re acting responsibly as an org.

3/ Cross-functional teams need visibility
At this 50+ scale, teams can become siloed because they have enough people to become a mini org. Leaders must work with other department leaders to maintain a level of visibility so we know what other areas are doing without overwhelming employees with comms.

4/ Leadership matches are a two-way process
Whether we’re talking about a Directly Responsible Individual or function leader, we never assign anyone something without their matched desire to do so.

5/ Identify and help low-performers quickly

We need to let team members know when they aren’t performing well and work with them to determine if there’s anything we can do to help them improve. Otherwise, poor performers can dictate the entire organization.

Short

At a startup, you have to approach every headcount doubling as if you're working at a new company. Comms, decision-making, processes, & goal-setting often break at each phase and they need to be re-thought from the ground up in order to scale.

At @Levels, we recently crossed 50+ employees, so we had a conversation with Sander Daniels, Co-founder of Thumbtack, to see how they solved these problems as they hit similar milestones: