

# Leadership and the Theory of Constraints

By Matt Adams, P.E.

**L**eadership is a major focus of APPA, and will continue to be for the foreseeable future. Every aspect of the educational facilities maintenance business environment is changing, and the theory and application of leadership is no exception. In fact, the APPA Leadership Academy and its four levels are a testament to this dynamic.

The assumption in this industry that we will continually be called upon “to do more with less” is here to stay. This directly affects leadership theory and our professional lives as leaders and administrators in the FM environment. In the past, leaders might have encountered the challenge of increased responsibility in the context of relative reductions in resources with a redoubling of efforts.

In other words, to meet the increasing demands of the institution we had to work harder and longer. That situation has now become the reality. However, is this really sustainable? If we acknowledge that more with less is the new fixed paradigm, then at some point will we as leaders run out of capacity? Twenty years from now, will each of us have to work 90 hours per week, completely stressed, and still just barely get by?

## LIMITED RESOURCES

With respect to staff, I propose that there are two limited resources within our institutions, and that each must be managed with great respect and consideration. The first is our employees: Both numerically and philosophically speaking, the single biggest resource each of us leads is our people. Faculty salaries and utilities aside, they are also one of the greatest resources of the FM environment as a whole. Given this fact, we must acknowledge that our best and most promising path to organizational success is through our people. This resource is limited, and therefore how we invest in and utilize it is of the utmost importance.

On the other hand, there is another limited resource that is almost as important, and in fact it might be even more important to each of us—our

time as leaders. Consider the work day, week, month, and year. Regardless of whether you work long days and take limited vacations, there is still a limit to your time. In other words, there is a limit to how much of “you” there is to devote to your department as a leader. There is a finite amount of “you” to go around and it could be called upon to deliver more each year from now on. From a management point of view, this means that “you” are a limiting constraint on your organization.

## THEORY OF CONSTRAINTS

The “goal” doctrine is based on the Theory of Constraints (TOC). In every organization there are constraints or bottlenecks that slow services delivery. Rigorous analysis and identification of bottlenecks is exercised routinely. Constraints are ranked, and the most impactful is targeted for elimination (this five-step process comes from Eliyahu Goldratt’s book, *The Goal*.)

Given the assumption that our capacity for leadership is a constrained resource, it is logical to apply the TOC to our leadership activities. The idea is to eliminate the bottlenecks in our individual business environment to free up more of our leadership resources and thus to be able to invest those resources into our organizations.

## CATEGORIZING ACTIVITIES

As leaders of departments or organizations, we perform many activities. These activities should be divided into at least two categories:

- An activity I perform that becomes a bottleneck for my staff (e.g., purchase approvals), and/or
- An activity that provides value to the department that only I can provide (a “lean” concept)



These two simple classifications identify required changes to reduce constraints. The options for any activity are:

Scenario	Required Action
1. Bottleneck with no unique value provided by me	Build system to leverage leadership
2. Bottleneck with unique value provided by me	Free up my personal resource to invest more time into this activity
3. No bottleneck with no unique value provided by me	Build system to leverage leadership
4. No bottleneck with unique value provided by me	No change until next evaluation

In the **first scenario**, we must assume that not only are we slowing our organizations by creating a bottleneck, but that we are not providing unique value to the process. For example, is it a good use of our limited leadership resources to personally sign purchase requests? Can this be done another way, thereby freeing up time for something more valuable to our organization? This is where “systems” come into place. Good leaders understand systems and their benefits to an organization.

A system is like a process but much better (a process is not as good as a system, because it still requires some of our leadership resources. A system is autonomous and will still function while we are on vacation.) A system executes a repeatable activity but also collects data each time and makes adjustments. It is a closed loop.

As leaders we design a system to include combinations or people, templates, information



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technology, and procedures. We carefully measure one to three metrics of the system's performance so that we can review that performance and make adjustments if the metrics suggest misalignment. It is paramount that these systems operate independently from us as leaders, and that they free up all the time we once spent performing this activity ourselves (creating a bottleneck.)

The **second scenario** is of particular interest. There will be activities that we as leaders execute with great value, but that also create a bottleneck to our organization. This is the reason for the self-analysis. We must free up our precious and limited time as leaders to invest in these organizational growth activities. If the bottleneck continues, we must continue to apply Goldratt's Theory of Constraints to find more of "me" as a leader to perform this highly valuable activity.


The **third scenario** requires either replacement by a system or delegation to a staff member. The staff member can also evaluate this activity using their own TOC. This is not good use of our limited leadership resources.

Finally, in the **fourth scenario**, there are activities that only we provide and that offer great value, so we have allocated enough precious time to complete them. These remain unchanged until analysis indicates a change in value or constraint to our organization.

#### INVESTING IN YOURSELF

We should always be ready to design and introduce systems to remove ourselves from low-value activities. There will never be enough of "us" as leaders unless we are thoughtful and deliberate in our assessment of leadership activities—in terms of both value and constraint on the organization. Ongoing review will identify new constraints or bottlenecks that must be removed.

For our organizations to thrive, we must ensure that time spent on ourselves as leaders is invested without constraint to those unique value-added activities that only we can best

provide. In this manner, we can meet the increasing demands on our organizations and ourselves in the future. 

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