By C. L. Max Nikias

A compelling reason exists for all high-level managers to scale back the amount of time they spend on email—and it harkens back to an Industrial-Age observation by Henry David Thoreau in “Walden” that is perhaps even more true in this Digital Age: People have “become tools of their tools.”

The very point of being a leader is to move an organization in a meaningful direction—yet email can have the opposite effect, blocking the leader from accomplishing anything proactive or of lasting substance.

I’ve had to restrain myself accordingly. Rather than spending my time glued to a screen and responding endlessly, I keep all of my emails brief—no more than an average text message. I am now certain that any topic that requires further deliberation is more effectively and more efficiently hashed out by phone or in a face-to-face meeting rather than in a rambling series of lengthy email exchanges.

As I’ve transitioned from professional, academic roles to leadership positions, I’ve come to appreciate an overriding principle: Effective leaders must maximize efficiency and speed on some tasks, in order to devote thoughtful focus to others. Email can throw a leader off course if used as anything more than a quick messaging system. After all, the leader has to keep the big picture in mind, and therefore must avoid being redirected constantly by other’s agendas.

Across the multiple email accounts I regularly use, I receive over 300 emails every day. In addition, I regularly initiate emails to my senior team to track projects they are overseeing. Even at one minute per email, I would spend half my waking
day on this pursuit. Instead, on an average
day, I have reduced my email usage down
to about two hours, far less than the
startling 7.4 hours the average American
professional spends.

This makes me more productive while
allowing me to be properly briefed on
the priorities that matter the most. For
example, USC a few weeks ago completed
the largest campus expansion in our history.
While I visited the site regularly, our capital
construction managers would also update
me by email with designs and photos of
everything from brick samples to stained
glass windows, with brief summaries of
the development’s progress. I offered
approvals and requests for simple changes
in text-sized emails. However, if there was
an issue that required further deliberation,
I would initiate a phone call that rendered
further emails moot.

Since I treat emails like many people
treat text messages, you may ask how
I treat actual text messages. In short, I
treat them just like emails, but with more
urgency: While I expect my emails to be
answered reasonably quickly, if I send a
text to a direct report, they know I need
to hear back right away.

It has been gratifying to see my policy
rubbing off on my direct reports and
senior colleagues. They’ve learned that the
best way to make their case isn’t through
flowery language, but by laying out facts
and issues in the most succinct manner
possible.

Granted, many things cannot be
communicated with such brevity. And
that’s fine. After all, the crucial nuances
of human communication don’t translate
well into cyberspace anyway. No healthy
organization can run purely on email,
especially not text-sized ones.

As an engineer who was active in the
development of many of the digital media
technologies that underpin the internet
today, I’ve become convinced that no
technology can replace a direct, person-to-
person encounter. Any issue that requires
a deeper discussion or multi-stakeholder
decision should be done face-to-face or, if
that is not possible, over the phone—but
certainly not by email.

I meet with all of my direct reports as a
group, each week to discuss every important
decision point the organization is facing.
Unlike my brief emails, these meetings
take more than half the business day, and
I expect in-depth discussions that allow
my senior officers to weigh in on issues
both within and outside of their regular
portfolios of responsibility. It is there that
the most important decisions are made
and the most important principles are
laid out for our organization. And it is
the reliable, weekly timing of these longer
face-to-face discussions that allow us
to keep our email usage to a minimum.

Previous generations of leaders knew
nothing comparable to the seductive
trap of email. And now this generation
must know how to resist that siren call,
relying—for the most important kinds
of communication—on the methods that
have withstood the test of time: talking
and meeting in person.