Speaking from experience, film sets can be chaos. Even independent short films can turn into big productions if they’re not organized properly. Most of the organization of a film set falls onto the shoulders of the assistant director. The assistant director acts as middleman between managerial staff and the cast/crew. They must be a jack of all trades essentially. They have control over things like making schedules and delegating duties, but also do administrative things like keep track of the budget and hold meetings and train employees.

Most people think the job of an assistant director is to just assist the director. After all, it is kind of the name. But the job is actually a lot bigger than that. A director’s assistant helps the director. The assistant director in reality runs the whole set so the director can just focus on the film and not be bothered by administrative problems for example. A director would ask their assistant for coffee, but would ask the assistant director to make a schedule out so everyone knows what is being worked on and when.

The assistant director must know how to delegate responsibilities. Larger film crews have a second, third, and sometimes even fourth assistant director to help with this task. There is too much going on sometimes for one person to handle it all personally. If the director says a daily call sheet has to be made for tomorrows shoot, the assistant director can hand it off to the second assistant director so the first can deal with bigger things like running the whole technical side of a set. Maybe there’s a problem with a cast member in makeup, so the assistant director instead of dropping everything just tells the third assistant director to handle it. One of the important pillars of a good leader is the ability to delegate responsibilities effectively.

Assistant directors are sometimes accountable for keeping a film on budget. They have to work closely with producers to work it out. A director has a vision, but it can be up to the assistant director to get the producers to pay so it can become reality. This also means an assistant director must manage waste on a set and keep it down.

There are a lot of meetings when a movie is being made. Before, during, and after the shooting is done. It is on the assistant director to manage these meetings, this goes back to the scheduling part of their job. A film set is not a democracy, and the entire cast and crew don’t sit down all together to work things out. That’s why the assistant director can call and run meetings.

The assistant director is in charge of hiring and firing employees on a set, as well as training those that need it. A film set is like a machine, the assistant director has to keep it running smoothly. This is accomplished by oiling the gears and finding new parts or taking out broken pieces. Everyone “below the line”, from production assistants to makeup and beyond, must go through the assistant director to work on a set. And once they get there, if they don’t know how to do something, it’s up to the assistant director to get them trained.

The assistant director seems to be the busiest person on a set, even if there are four assistant directors. They don’t seem to get the credit they deserve, but without them the set would fall apart or descend into anarchy. Everyone on a set depends on the assistant director, that’s a lot of pressure. And all the glory goes to people “above the line” who didn’t have to schedule or delegate or track the budget or hold meetings or train employees. So many jobs for one person, I hope they know they are appreciated.