
Keeping Track of Priority Situations

Purpose

To improve the way you keep track of priority concerns.

Introduction

Setting priority is an activity that many people take for granted. There are two reasons for this. For some issues, the priority is apparent; the threat of shutting down operations or the possibility of a serious accident obviously demand immediate attention. In a few situations, the priority is set by policy at higher levels. There are a great many other situations, however, then you must decide which issues must get resolved first and which should be postponed. You have developed through your own experience ways for setting priorities. Only by reviewing that approach periodically can you be sure your methods are sound.

At work, when several issues arise and you have the responsibility for determining the order of their resolution, how do you set priorities? What questions do you ask? What thoughts particularly influence the priority of a specific situation?

Logic shows that effective priority setting requires careful thought; not one, but several factors need to be considered and judged:

- **Current impact**—or the seriousness of the situation today on organizational or personal goals.
- **Future impact**—or the long-term growth potential of the situation if not addressed now.
- **Time frame**—or the deadline for achieving a resolution.

Situations then can be compared—and their priorities set—on the basis of these three factors.

Pitfalls in Priority Setting

Unfortunately, logic does not always prevail, as these familiar characters demonstrate:

- **The Fire Fighters.** They rush from one urgent action to the next; important or high growth concerns are never handled until they are over issues that need immediate attention.

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- **The Dreamers.** They are so concerned about the day after tomorrow that current deadlines are not met. They go out of business today planning for tomorrow.
 - **Do the Easy Ones First.** These people postpone the tough issues until there is more time or they are “in the mood.” They avoid uncomfortable situations—even though those situations might be more important, more immediate, or have higher growth potential. Unfortunately, difficult issues tend to keep growing until they are too big to handle.
 - **The Squeaking Wheel.** These people set priority based on personality or politics only, while ignoring additional facts about the current and future impact and time frame of the situation. To their dismay, they soon discover that everyone has become a squeaking wheel.
 - **The Top of the Heap.** When faced with a full “in basket” or numerous “E-mail messages,” these people dive right in and start acting on the items at the top.
 - **Phone/e-mail-itis.** Whenever the phone rings or vibrates or e-mail arrives, responding to that particular inquiry or request automatically gets high priority. It does not matter that attention is diverted from meetings, learning, or project-related work and momentum on those endeavors is lost.
 - **Wait Until It's Official.** Some people just will not take action until an e-mail is distributed, a policy is written, or the boss has commanded. This is the costly way to set priority. It ignores other valid information—about the current and future impact and time frame of concerns—until inexpensive action is no longer possible.
 - **The Occupational Hobbyists.** These people enjoy doing one kind of work. They have done it before and get a “kick” out of it. You know which concerns get their priority. Other aspects of the job are ignored regardless of the impact or time frame.

Ways to Improve Priority Setting

Here are five experience-tested ideas to avoid the pitfalls and improve priority setting:

- **Build Priority Setting into Work Planning.** As you review the list of things to do at the beginning of the day or week, consciously ask which items are affecting you today, which have a time frame associated with them, and which will have high impact in the future? Review your key responsibilities and objectives frequently to see that your priorities for daily projects lead to job success.
- **Make Priority Setting Visible.** If you receive a request for your services, jot down a few notes on the current and future impact and time frame of the situation.
- **Train Others in Priority Setting.** Work with others to teach them to ask good priority-setting questions.

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- **Update Priorities.** On situations that require a sustained effort, periodically seek current information to make sure a change has not made the situation a low priority.
 - **Test Priorities through Forced Choice.** When faced with an urgent request for action, describe the current and future impact and time frame of other projects that will be postponed as a result. This tests whether the request can be accommodated. The short- and long-term impact of alternatives on important goals and the need for immediate action can then be compared.

Setting priority is often difficult. Saying "no" to a colleague or someone in a more senior position is tough. Saying "yes" when it means undertaking a difficult job can be tougher. The way to be sure that your reply is appropriate is to discipline yourself to get relevant information regarding the current and future impact and time frame of specific situations.

Instructions

1. Which of the listed pitfalls is most typical of your priority setting? Please illustrate with a job example.

2. How can you overcome these pitfalls using one or two of the ways suggested for improving your priority setting?
