

MANAGE PRIORITIES, NOT TIME (Make it Your Top Priority)

*"It doesn't matter how right you do something.
If it's the wrong thing, it is always going to be wrong."*

(Peter Drucker)

Manage priorities, not time.

Intuition, gut-feeling, external pressure, guilt and guesswork commonly guide decisions people make about their priorities. Those guidelines may not be sufficiently balanced with those which will lead us to our intended destination; and they often lack the discipline necessary to stop us from being inefficiently side-tracked.

Time-management is a misnomer and the notion of managing time, plainly absurd. Like phases of the moon and the year's seasons, time is a constant that will not be planned or controlled: it can only be managed in the sense of "coping with". When we speak of time-management we are actually referring to our self-management, the methodical or haphazard ways we organise ourselves.

The basis of successful self-management is planning and priority-management based on a clear sense of values and purpose. This is a matter of *keeping the main thing the main thing*.

The conventional approach (Today's jobs: A = Must do. B = Should do. C = Deferrable) is OK as far as it goes: it does at least ask us to consider the relative importance of what lies before us each day.

Keeping the main thing the main thing

But unless the criteria for comparison are founded on what is truly valuable, our decisions may be entirely inappropriate because we miss what really matters. Many urgent activities have the appearance of importance but do not contribute to making the difference we want or are paid to make. If we cannot readily distinguish between urgency and importance, we may have a well-ordered day that is otherwise pointless, one which generates pressing and serious problems or puts us further behind.

A simple A, B and C list may do little, for example, to guide answers to these questions:

- When a colleague initiates an unplanned visit to pass the time of day, which is more important: completion of today's A and B lists or attending to her so as to develop or maintain the professional relationship?
- When a prospective customer or colleague asks you to drop everything for a crisis arising from their bad planning, should that constitute an emergency on your part? If your answer is, "It depends . . .", on what does it depend?
- Should "opening the mail" appear on the A, B or C lists? Would that be an easier question if it were posed thus: on which list, if any, should "opening mail in the order in which it is received" appear?

- What order of priority should be routinely assigned to "maintaining my health and wellbeing"?, "developing relationships with my manager"? and "developing relationships with my team"?
- If you are too stressed or too busy to plan, should you stop and plan anyway?
- If you are unwell, at what stage of unwellness should you put aside other matters to attend to your health?

A focus on "time management" may result in our becoming overwhelmed with Small Stuff - activities that do not contribute to realising our purpose, values or vision for the future. We must know where we're going and have plans for getting there. Make these the first questions for methodically managing your priorities: Which is the Big Stuff? To what extent does this task or activity contribute to reaching it?

Big stuff . . ? Small stuff . . ?

Remember the story about putting stones in a jar? Put the Big Stuff in first and there's room for small stones, then pebbles. After the pebbles, there's room for sand. After the sand, still room for water. But start with the water and anything else forces the container to overflow. Start with the sand and you'll fill it completely with Small Stuff. The point is: know what the valuable, *Big Stuff* is. Attend to it and plan for it, first. "First things first", Steven Covey reminds us.

*"Purpose is the engine that powers our lives.
Without it we toil in a job but never build a career."* (Denis Waitley)

Start here

Connect your priorities to your values and your Big Picture. First establish your purpose, or mission: your biggest Big Picture. Some call this "higher purpose", the super-ordinate reason for your existence that stands above all else. Your degree of clarity or unclarity about this guides your everyday activities every day: you may as well be as clear as possible about it. Only you can define it. Schedule regular points at which you will re-visit this and if necessary refine it: at three, four or six-monthly intervals, perhaps.

Whenever I have been part of groups working on this, fewer than 10% are able to say they have already taken this step; for most it is a challenging task requiring assistance. Their first answers to the question, "What is my purpose or mission?" are initially of this kind: "To do the best I can; To be the best I can; Be happy; Enjoy life; Make enough money to be comfortable; Raise my children; Serve my community; Make a difference . . .".

Greater clarity may come from asking of these answers, further questions: "Why?" or "So that what . . . ?" For example, of the statement, "To make a difference", usefully clarifying questions include, "A difference to what?" "What kind of a difference?" "What for?" When there are no more answers to the questions, we have either reached our Higher Purpose statement or (more likely) it's a sign that there's more work to be done on it. Give it time. Return to it periodically.

Clarify your role and responsibilities

Next, relate that statement of purpose to your business or organisational role. Your position description or job specification should outline not only what you are to do but also why: the overall purpose of your responsibilities and their relationships to others' duties. You should clearly understand how your role contributes to their work, the current business plan, the organisational purpose and the desired organisation culture.¹

Return regularly to your Big Picture

At least fortnightly and today if it's been longer, focus first and even if only momentarily on the Big Stuff and the achievements you want that will mark, at the end of the year and according to your Purpose or Mission, a successful 12 months. The values, principles, themes and behaviour change targets (often found in discarded New Year resolution lists) that you once set to guide your progress; whatever summary you have of your role, responsibilities and success criteria; the plans and strategy that you designed to ensure your methodical progress towards your goals. (You **did** make those plans . . . ?)

Things won't go according to a plan that does not exist

*"You cannot fashion a bird spear while you're on the trail.
You will die of hunger before you finish the journey."*

(Maori proverb)

If you have not done this recently and are too busy to do it now, you may be "driving 90 miles an hour with your lights out". Get off the road: wherever it's taking you may not be where you need to end up and you may waste a lot of time getting there. For a successful journey you must have a map of the journey and to use it, at least five essential reference-points:

- 1 Where you are going: not just in relation to the task immediately in hand but towards which Big Stuff.
- 2 The equipment you will need for the journey. Think in terms of skills, competencies, methodology, gaps in knowledge, understand or practice to be closed or reduced.
- 3 The best route for getting there (the Plan).
- 4 Indicators you could expect to see on the way at pre-determined points, if your progress is on target.
- 5 One more, which will be revealed again at the end of this article. Got it?

Construct a ready-reference

List the tasks, issues and other matters you have attended to recently. With the aid of the following four-sector grid, try to establish which of those have contributed to your Big Picture, (the *Non-urgent, Very Important* sector) and which of them can be characterised as belonging

¹ Many job/position specifications/descriptions are not fit for purpose. Check out yours against our criteria. Contact us for details.

within other sectors. Deciding where each fits may take some practice and refinement: it is not always easy but you may soon begin to see a pattern in your priority choices.

Next, in the light of your role and the outcomes required of you but with special reference to your Big Picture, write within the *Non-urgent, Very Important* sector those tasks and duties most likely to minimise your spending time on Urgent and Important matters.

HIGH		
URGENCY	<p>1 Urgent but not important</p> <p>Reacting to the urgencies of others</p> <p>Throwing ill-considered "solutions" at serious problems as quick-fixes.</p> <p>Attending meetings which have possible short-term benefits, but little or no contribution to long-term plans.</p> <p>Dealing with pressing and serious matters without reference to an overall plan or well-considered priority list.</p>	<p>2 Urgent and important</p> <p>Dealing with -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • crises, and emergencies • complaints and malperformance • problems that re-surface constantly • destructive conflicts • overdue critical projects • damaged relationships • own stress-related illness • absence of key people through their stress-related illness
	<p>3 Not urgent, not important</p> <p>Attending to unsorted tasks in the order they catch the attention</p> <p>Yielding to unscheduled interruptions without checking their importance</p> <p>Unfocused busy-ness, dithering or idle <i>chewing the fat</i>.</p> <p>Anxiety and fretfulness</p> <p>Working outside of own strengths and competence</p>	<p>4 Important but not urgent</p> <p>See <i>What should be your Important but not Urgent Stuff</i>, below</p>
LOW IMPORTANCE HIGH		

Whenever you pause to consider the priority you are about to assign to a task, first reference this grid. This becomes your basic ready-reference for constructing priority-lists, in whatever format you choose - the A, B and C or some other.

Aim to increase your focus on *Important but Not Urgent* activities because they are the causes of the Big Stuff and contribute towards your desired future.

Reduce *Urgent but Not Important* activities and those that are unnecessary or aimless (*Not Urgent, Not Important*). Attending to these is what causes almost all *Urgent and Important* events - the crises. Most crises are the effects of earlier, unwise priority-management decisions.

What should be your *Important but not Urgent*, stuff?

That's for you to determine, based on how you express your own purpose and vision, your values and assessment of developmental needs. The following are characteristically Big Stuff for most people:

- Values clarification, visioning, and setting career or *life* goals

- Methodical goal-setting and strategic planning
- Identifying improvement opportunities to reduce ideal-reality gaps
- Learning from experience and applying past knowledge to new situations
- Process simplification and improvement
- Enabling (up-skilling) others and empowering (authorising) them to act
- Enhancing leadership practices (to give leadership over what is important to us)
- Enhancing performance management and coaching skills
- Enhancing interpersonal relationships skills and practices for 1:1 and group or team purposes
- Developing constructive relationships
- Enhancing interdependence.

What is often overlooked . . .

Some leaders and managers make developing the competencies and capacity of **other people** the prime focus of their priorities for “people-development” and forget to make a priority of their own. A balanced focus on developing ourselves and others is desirable and in order to succeed in our roles, we should start with the former. (That’s pretty much the reason we’re advised in air travel to put on our own oxygen masks first. We can’t support those for whom we have some responsibility unless we’ve first attended to ourselves.) Begin with the only thing in this world over which you have complete autonomy and control: yourself!

When considering your own development, consider what conditions are those in which you function best. Compare those with what you have in reality. This comparison sometimes reveals that what we have previously regarded as a “support system” is a toxic environment – one that does not support our craft or role. Plan to change what you can, to close whatever gaps exist. Include attention to those conditions that supply or renew your energy, creativity, resilience and persistence:

- Professional support
- Personal support
- Wellness or wellbeing plans
- Work/other life balance or mix.
- Stress reduction strategies
- Thinking skills and habits of mind, e.g. –
 - Holding the focus
 - “Rising above” problems, stress and challenges
 - Striving for accurate and precise information on which to base decisions and plans
 - Systematic problem-solving
 - Persisting with problems when solutions are not readily apparent
 - Flexibility
 - Metacognition (knowing what we know and don’t know; being aware of and modifying our thought processes and attitudes)

- Creating, imagining and innovating
- Finding humour.

Go visual!

Some people have visual or spatial learning preferences and find that lists simply get lost or overlooked. (They may have a great filing system but forget how they used it to file a particular item or, worse, forget how they once organised the system.) If this is the case for you, consider creating your priority-lists in a *mind-map*, *Gantt chart*, simple *critical path* or *flow-chart* diagram: place it where you will see it easily and often.

Refresh yourself

When making a daily list or one for the week ahead, put yesterday's or last week's priority-list aside, at least momentarily. Don't simply rehash it. Avoid merely raising in status each of the tasks left undone, adding whatever else was on top of your mind as you brushed your teeth in the morning. Remind yourself of the Big Picture and the Big Stuff. Refer to the grid. Start afresh with these in mind.

Need help with this?

Not everyone finds this a straightforward process and many find it particularly challenging. It's one of things we commonly attend to during one-to-one mentoring work with clients, because it can be difficult. Clients often begin by saying, "That's all very well, but given that I'm already up to my armpits in what is both urgent and important, I don't have any time to stop for this!"

Talk to your coach or mentor.

Reference-point #5

(See page 3). To use any map you must first have an accurate picture of where you are now. Did you get it?

Tom Watkins

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