

Don't Get Caught with Your Priorities Upside Down

Traditional wisdom about setting priorities promises you higher productivity and a greater sense of accomplishment. All you have to do is write out a to-do list, prioritize it by order of importance and urgency (using the ubiquitous "A," "B" and "C" labels) and then tackle it, right? Then why, after a busy day on the legislative floor, meeting with constituents, answering e-mails, and making that important connection with you family, do you still find yourself saying, "I didn't get anything done today"?

There are *two reasons*. *One* may be that your priorities changed during the day, but for good reason. No, you didn't accomplish "A," "B" or "C" on your to-do list, but you did respond appropriately to the curveballs thrown at you today. Give yourself a break and a pat on the back. You responded to your priorities appropriately. The quick-changes to your priority list are not going to go away unless you unplug technology and retreat from political life. Accept this as way of life even if you buy into the old adage that you should find ways to "work smarter, not harder."

The *other reason* may be that you have fallen into the "ACT then THINK" method of setting priorities. It is common to default to this approach when multiple tasks and requests on your time overwhelm you. In some cases, you may ACT then THINK out of habit - one you haven't yet decided to break. To help you break these old patterns, understand these five common priority-setting traps and how you can avoid them.

1. Whatever hits first

Do you "choose" your priorities simply by responding to things as they happen? If so, your priorities are really choosing you. For example, your phone rings with a request for information on one of your co-workers or clients. You stop what you're doing to hunt down the needed information when your assistant pops in and asks that you call the your director right away. So, you put the first request aside and call Mr. Director. Sound familiar? Think about how this general lack of control over your day contributes to your stress level. You are buying into the underlying belief that you need to do things as they come up. It is a version of the erroneous "handle a piece of paper only once." The THINK then ACT approach suggests that you negotiate with people to respond in a time frame that's convenient to you and agreeable to them---when possible. If you feel like a ball in a pinball machine, you are falling into "whatever hits first" trap.

2. Path of least resistance

When was the last time you heard yourself say, "It's just easier to do it myself"? This is not always an incorrect assumption, but if you're saying it too often, you're probably not giving your staff enough credit or you have the wrong person in charge or maybe you're simply following the path of least resistance. Ask yourself these questions: Am I trying to avoid conflict? Do I need to invest time or money to train someone to take on some of the lower-priority tasks I am currently performing? Honest answers will help you determine what alternative action you need

to take. Decide and do it now. In extreme cases, it might be necessary to admit that there ARE other qualified people on the scene.

3. Squeaky wheels

It probably didn't take you but a few hours once you entered your current position to identify who the squeaky wheels are. Their requests are always urgent and they are very successful at getting you to respond according to their time frame. They are the ones who always have that little "urgent" sign on their emails. However, do their requests really demand your immediate attention or all of your attention? If not, give them a specific time or date when they can expect you to respond. They may squeak a little more initially, but hold your own. Eventually they'll get your message and your priorities will remain your priorities, not theirs. Admit that this is a tough situation for a well-meaning professional who wants to please co-workers. Know that this trap will bring burn-out faster than the other five

4. Precedent

"We've always done it this way in the ABC Company, the HR team, or in our family." Although tradition can be good for the culture and give some ballast to challenges in a well-branded company, it can be a detriment to effective priority management. Why? Precedent can blind-sight you and keep you focused lower priorities or ineffective or inefficient ways of accomplishing tasks. When you hear yourself saying, "This is the way we do it here" or "We've been doing this for x number of years" just stop and question if the precedent is still serving you well.

A new precedent being set unconsciously by many well-intentioned professionals is the trap of clearing off all your e-mails from the deck the first thing in the morning. Your most productive time of day might be in the early am and there you are giving your time to the e-mail that has little or no import to you other than clearing it from the screen. You're trapped in the illusion that you are being efficient by answering all your e-mails—handle a "Piece of paper only once." Don't fall for it. Address only those that are most important. Save the other ones for later when you can hardly keep your eyes open. It won't matter.

When the holidays come up what precedent might you and your family consider deleting so that you can have more focused time to spend with each other? This takes some soul-searching to separate ineffective precedent from valued tradition. Be careful not to sacrifice the latter. Even though children rebel and say "do we have to do that again this year?" Try giving up the traditions and watch them rebel!

5. Inspiration

If you wait until you're "inspired" to respond to something like creating an E-Newsletter for your business or department, it probably isn't going to happen, even if this task is a high priority. Instead, remind yourself that your experience tells you that this newsletter has produced significant results. High-priority items won't always be the easiest or most pleasant tasks on your list, but dig in and do them anyway, and you'll be glad you did.

Inspiration is often synonymous with the proverbial "waiting for a block of time!" If you are waiting for a block of time to do something, try to remember the last time one of those happened your way. Plan for high priorities and schedule them.

On the personal side, taking time for yourself often falls into this category. Have you taken that half-day just for you? Not the professional you, mom or dad you, partner or spouse you, but just you . Nothing of import happens until we give it the focused energy it needs and the scheduled time to accomplish it. Avoid these five traps and watch yourself feel a lot more like you are at the helm of your life and time.

Pam Vaccaro, CSP is a professional speaker whose expertise in managing time and attention brings her before audiences internationally. She is a Certified Speaking Professional, the highest earned designation by the National Speakers Association. Her company Designs on Time challenges companies and associations to rethink traditional time management. She is most known for tailored programs and innovative ideas.

www.designsontime.com

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Pam Vaccaro, MA, CSP