



Purpose-Driven Priorities *Putting First Things First*

"The secret of success is the constancy of purpose."

-Benjamin Disraeli

Increasingly businesses are failing today because they lack the ability to set and keep priorities. They fail to project their mission/purpose onto their employees. Amazingly, most people will admit that this is true for their organization. They fail to make the main thing, the main thing. Life is about choices. You choose how you act and react to everyday situations. We choose the priorities we value. It trickles down to our daily routines. So why don't we follow through? Seven of the most popular excuses are: Seven of the most popular excuses are:

- We do what we like to do before we do what we don't like to do.
- We do things that provide the most immediate closure.
- We do the quick tasks first.
- We respond on the basis of who wants it.
- We work on things in order of their arrival.
- We work on the basis of the "Squeaky Wheel" principle.
- We respond on the basis of the consequences to us for doing nor not doing something.

It's funny how many criteria we can think of that determine when we don't do the things we do. Whether or not we are willing to admit it or are even aware of it, the many distractions that occur during the day all involve priority decisions. Whenever we decide, for whatever reason, to engage in one action, we decided at that point against engaging in another. It's important to remember, though, that finishing tasks is the goal, not the activity around them. We need to stay focused on achieving our goals so we won't fall into the trap of constantly changing priorities and staying busy just to be busy. This way we can determine our priorities in terms of results, rather than activities.

"The fault lies within ourselves....," as Shakespeare wrote. We define priorities in

terms of activities. Did you know that surveys taken reveal that out of 100 people, 23 do not know what they want (leaving 77 who do know). 67 do know, but don't know how to get it (leaving 10 who know how). Of those 10 who know what they want and how to get it, 8 are unwilling to pay the price. Only 2 out of 100 will ever reach their goal because they set priorities, have developed a plan and are willing to pay the price. Where do you fall in this list? Here are some imperatives for setting priorities to get you started on the path to achieving what you want in life.

When we set priorities we need to know what we are here to accomplish--whether at our jobs or in life. When we set priorities, we need to have a good understanding of cause and effect relationships on our job. It's all about finding our purpose. We need to know not only what activities lead to accomplishing that purpose, but where we can get some answers if we don't understand that relationship. The problem we face though is that most of us decide when to do activities at work based on their importance or urgency, rather than does it match our purpose. Actually, though, all activities we perform have some degree of importance. They generally fall into one of four categories. Let's look at these four to see how we can better determine what to do and when to achieve success and mastery over our time on the job.

1. Important (and Urgent) things are those that contribute significantly to our goals; they have high value. They relate directly to the organization's goals and meeting customer needs immediately. The more direct the contribution, the more important the activity. Important things also tend to have long-term consequences. They make a difference for a long time.

To find out your most important and urgent tasks, try the well-known *Pareto Principle*. Vilfredo Pareto was a 19th Century economist who came up with the 80/20 principle that can be applied to setting priorities. If you list your top 10 priorities, and then circle the first and second, taking care of those will make the other 8 fall in line. Therefore, concentrating on the top 20% of your priorities will accomplish the remaining 80% involuntarily. In business it has been proven using this principle that 80 percent of profits may come from 20 percent of a business's customers. Try it.

2. Important (but not Urgent) tasks are things you need to get done for the good of organization, but over a period of time. They should be scheduled second in importance, but have priority over everything else. Like category #1, they make a difference over a long time. They are in line with the organization's purpose and goals for both the present campaign and the long term. Even though we know how important it is to prioritize our work, many of us still have difficulty focusing on just the most important tasks at hand. It is sometimes tempting to get into "activity mode" and just keep working on clearing our desks, without focusing on doing the most important things first.

Again, Pareto helps us out with his discovery that in any set of elements the critical elements usually constitute a minority of the set. If 80% of our activities will produce only about 20% of the results we want, then 20% will produce 80% of the results. What we need to do is to learn to concentrate on the high-value important things (those which help us achieve our goals) and take care of those items first.

3. Urgent (but not important) things account for most of the distractions we face each day at work. They have short-term consequences and must be done NOW! They won't wait. They may or may not relate to our goals or make a significant contribution, but urgent things are for more demanding than important things. They involve telephone calls, memos, interruptions by often well-meaning individuals and emergencies. Often we set ourselves up, though to receive distractions by welcoming them. We have become our own worst enemy in handling our priorities.

To help you deal with these unplanned distractions, schedule your time and be ruthless about adhering to it. You will quickly find that most of the "urgent" distractions weren't that urgent and could wait. Schedule a "quiet time" into your day when nothing is allowed to distract you. During this quiet time you will be accomplishing important tasks. Distractions can be put on hold unless they are of a nature that they MUST be given attention immediately (like the building is on fire!). You will find distractions coming to you less frequently as people discover that you won't allow interruptions to get in the way of doing your job. Again, try it.

4. Neither important or urgent items are things we do in the routine of the day that waste our time. Answering e-mails, returning telephone calls and general tasks that either can be put off, or someone else could be doing. What are you doing that another associate with either more time or a better ability to accomplish mundane tasks could be doing? Schedule one or two times a day when you will accomplish these tasks. E-mail is a constant. Most people don't expect an answer within 24 hours. Most people are surprised by a returned telephone call within 24 hours (or at all). The excuse: "I/We never go around to it." amounts to a white flag of surrender to unimportant and not urgent interruptions.

You will find as you set your priorities in line with your organization's goals and your own personal life goals you will have less interruptions and more time to accomplish what you want to do. You will find yourself becoming more successful at your purpose and in life. You will find others re-orienting their schedules to accommodate yours out of respect for your "valued time.". You will find more time to do what you want to do and less of what others expect you to do (in their place).

Begin today to prioritize tomorrow's schedule. Demonstrate the wisdom, courage and discipline to do the important things first. Ask yourself...What am I

here to accomplish (my purpose)? What jobs require me and me alone to accomplish them? What can someone else (who might have more time) do better? What must be done immediately? What tasks can I schedule at a more appropriate time? When will I schedule my "quiet time?" Try it out for several weeks and see if your job becomes less hectic and more efficient.

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