

LEARNING HOW TO SET PRIORITIES

By Peter C. DeMarco

(Originally published December 8, 2015)



My boss promoted me about a year ago because he saw I could get things done. But now that I'm a leader, he is frustrated because I am never on top of all that needs doing. Between trying to complete the tasks he gives me and trying to lead my team, I'm putting in more time than ever before. But it seems like I am accomplishing less. Why is this?

You are not alone! The biggest challenge a top performer must overcome when transitioning into a leadership position is learning to manage the competing demands on time. Effective and ethical leaders master these demands by setting sound priorities, for themselves and their teams.

What is a priority? A "good" is anything that completes the whole. A priority is a choice between two competing "goods" given limited time. As simple as this answer might appear, we often miss a subtle point: a priority is not a choice between a good and a bad, only one of which should be done. In fact, sound priorities are a choice between two real goods, both of which need to be done, but done in the right order.

For example, when I was in high school my parents sometimes told me I didn't have my priorities straight because I was more focused on girls than grades. My parents weren't saying girls were bad for me; only that my time ought to be spent first on the higher good of educating my mind. (Fast forward: found the right girl, married 33+ years, we have six daughters... Now, I find myself spending time chasing away the wrong boyfriends!)

In business, the priority tensions constantly appear. For example: If you want quality, you ain't going to get quantity (and vice versa). As a leader, you are expected to set the priorities of your team, helping them to get all of the goods done, but in an order of action that improves long-term performance, reduces risks and embeds ethical decision-making at every level of your organization.

To improve your ability to set sound priorities, ask yourself these four questions:

1. Do I know how much time is available?

Time is the spouse, not the adversary, of our priorities. Leaders sometimes forget to ask how much time is available to complete a task. When your boss gives you a task or goal, the first thing you ought to do is figure out how much time you have to complete it. Understanding time expectations will help you determine the priority sequence. Too many leaders fail simply because they take their eye off the clock.

2. Do I allow myself to be distracted or avoid doing what ought to be done?

My brother, a tool maker, has a keen eye for what people ought to be doing. He once confronted a sales vice president who was spending a lot of time on the factory floor, socializing with the workers. “What are you doing here?” my brother asked the startled VP. “We would prefer you get to know more customers first or there won’t be many of us left to get to know. Get out there and sell!” Many leaders avoid doing what they ought to be doing, seduced by being busy rather than doing the important things that sustain the health and performance of the organization.

3. Do I know what makes my organization tick (and tock)?

Effective leaders understand how all of the individual parts (people, process, technology, and so on) come together to form a unified whole. To do that you have to see how the various parts of the organization are performing together. Performance is always a function of time. The tick represents all those qualities necessary to form communication relationships among the parts. The tock represents the measurable intensity of those qualities. So, for the leader to prioritize, he or she must have a coherent understanding of how the parts work together (tick) and fit into the whole at the right level of intensity to be harmonious (tock). To understand what makes your organization tick, you need to know the tock: those performance numbers that determine if you are winning or losing in the time available.

4. Do I know the real limits of my organization?

To perform in the timeframe required, effective leaders understand the capacity of their organization, where constraints exist and how to prioritize resources for them. Remember, the ultimate constraint on your organization’s capacity to perform is time. Adopt the winning attitude of the legendary football coach, Vince Lombardi, who once said, “We didn’t lose the game; we just ran out of time.”

More priority challenges exist, of course, but answering these initial four priority questions should help you to begin to assess your performance as a leader, accomplish more, and meet the expectations of your boss.