



Manage Priorities, Not Time

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"It is the mark of great people to treat trifles as trifles and important matters as important."

[Doris Lessing]

"Priority is a function of context."

[Stephen R. Covey]

90 Miles an Hour with the Lights Out

It's easy to become mesmerized by the *10 Urgent and Important Things To Do Today* that relentlessly present themselves for attention immediately we've dealt with the previous *Top 10*. We think we must work harder to get them under control before we can afford the luxury of strategic thinking and well-considered planning. It's the main reason we get stuck on the treadmill.

Caught in this trap, we may register *This is a crazy but I'm not a quitter!* or, *I don't think I can do this for much longer*, or *I'm not sure I'm cut out for this*. But we usually continue anyway, ignoring or suppressing our instincts, wisdom and real needs. It makes as much sense as running low on fuel while accelerating past gas stations because we have to get somewhere fast.

The wrong path to our goals will never lead us there. However how hard we work to do things right, they're always going to be the wrong things. Given how easy it is to establish we're on the wrong path, it's surprising how often people behave as though they don't understand this simple truth. They miss or suppress the warning signals, including:

- Decreased ability to foresee and pre-empt difficulties
- Confusion and anxiety about responsibilities, challenges and conflict
- Unwise decision-making that creates problems and unproductive wheel-spinning
- Overwhelming and never-ending lists of tasks simultaneously important and urgent
- Wrong results or the right results at great cost
- Persistent frustration with continually increasing effort, unproductiveness and recurring problems
- Pushing for results without balancing attention to the best methods for getting them
- Negative thinking loops which generate negative events, spinning out, freaking out or lashing out.

When these states become frequent or habitual, it's almost certain we're on the road to Nowhere Useful, sometimes at 90 miles an hour with the lights out. Rather than more of the same effort, we do better to pause long enough to figure out what's causing the problem, and then improve our processes.

Time Management is Not the Main Thing

People experiencing unhealthy levels of workplace-generated stress often attribute the principal cause to their having far too many responsibilities to attend to or complete satisfactorily, in the time available. When many of those responsibilities become simultaneously important and urgent, they are faced with seemingly impossible decisions. They need, they say, to somehow get off the increasingly fast-spinning treadmill to learn better time management systems and techniques.

But the notion of managing time (planning, organising and influencing its passing) is plainly absurd, as futile as trying to prevent the onset of winter. Time is a constant that cannot and won't be planned or controlled; it can be managed only in the sense of *coping with*. All we can really manage is what we plan and actually do with whatever time we appear to have available.

Priority management is a different matter altogether. It requires a focus on readily distinguishing between urgency and importance. If we cannot do this we may have an ordered, well-timed day in which we miss what really matters; one which allows for completion of all known current tasks but generates unnecessary stress and serious problems or puts us further behind. Too many urgent activities have the appearance of importance but contribute little or nothing to making the difference we want or are paid to make.

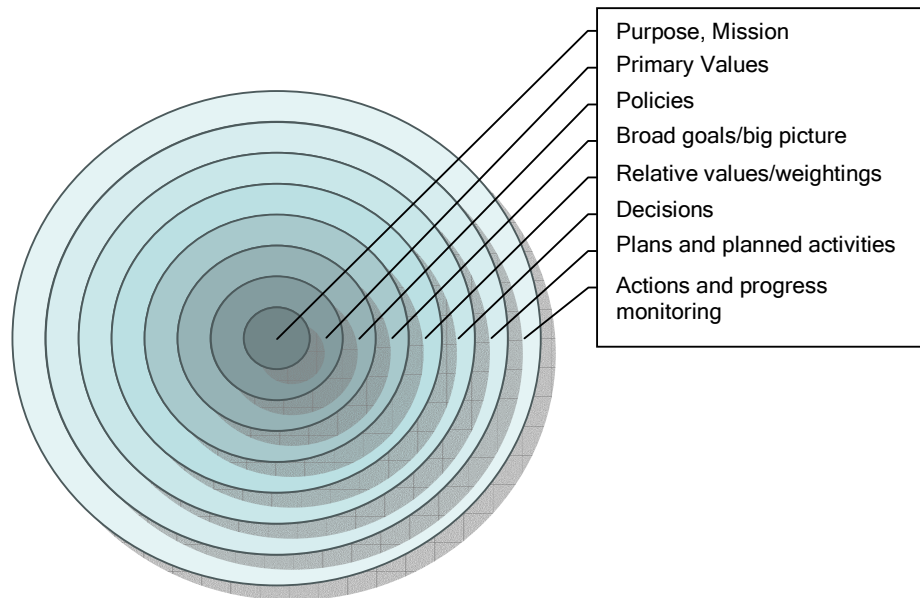
Priority management is a foundational aspect of self-management, the ways we control, influence and organise ourselves. Even a modest increase in priority management competence can significantly reduce the stress usually associated with "time-management" problems.

The Main Thing Missing is the *Main Thing*

Priority means *main concern; precedence; right of way; first concern*. Priorities are *predetermined assignments of value to different types of events and to people*. They are the indications of relative importance we reference in our planning and decision-making, though not necessarily final designations of the order of tasks necessary to accomplish those plans.

Successful priority management requires that we determine in advance of the need to make decisions based on them: (i) Our *first concern* (personal life purpose or mission and values); (ii) The wider context (the larger goals within which we are currently managing priorities); and (iii) The particular order or sequence in which things generally ought to take place, occupy our attention or receive our energy and efforts, based on a consideration of the relative value of all the matters which could. The purpose is to ensure our decisions result in plans and activities which align with and accomplish our Bigger Picture – in short, to keep us on track.

We can then plan and arrange whatever is within our ability to control or influence (including ourselves) to ensure that, as far as possible the pre-determined weightings we assigned things, are followed. In the event of an apparent clash of priorities our point of reference is that pre-determined order.¹ Without pre-determined assignment of relative values, we are at the mercy of impulsivity, gut-feeling, guilt, guesswork, others' influence and the vagaries of improvised, impromptu judgements invented anew for each occasion.



The ability to assign relative values (or give weightings to matters) presumes that we know (and ideally can articulate) our own values and where relevant, those of the organisation within which our plans are to be accomplished. Values do not exist in isolation; they are all connected to other values within individually-held hierarchies of values, at the head of which is individual purpose and our primary values: what may be termed, an individual's *Main Thing*.²

Keeping the main thing the main thing, is central to priority management. It depends on a clear sense of purpose and values. Purpose and values combined, are The Main Thing from which policies, processes, practices and decisions about priorities, flow.

¹ Either it is correct and resolves the conflict, or it is incorrect and needs at some later stage to be reconsidered and re-set.

² A value is a judgement about what is important and worthwhile. Values act as guides to action: *Because I believe that... and therefore value this... I hold this policy... and it follows that I behave thus...*

First Things and Big Stuff, First

What then, ought to constitute *The Main Thing* in our lives? What should it comprise and resemble? How ought we characterise it? Well, here's trick - you must define that for yourself, as we all must do. Whatever it is, it's driving you and your life anyway, no matter how much or little you are aware of it, so unless you're already clear about it you may as well clarify it. Otherwise, (to use an analogy attributed to Stephen Covey) you may find when you reach the top of whatever ladder you're determined to climb, that it's leaning against the wrong wall.

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 this: understand what the valuable, *Big Stuff* is. Attend to it and plan for it, first. "*First things first*", we are reminded.

"The older I get the more wisdom I find in the ancient rule of taking first things first. A process which often reduces the most complex human problem to a manageable proportion."

[[Dwight D. Eisenhower](#)]

A methodical approach to personal priority-management provides a framework for identifying and focusing on what is really important and is truly valuable, the Big Stuff of our lives and work: that which helps us realise the future we want.

It also helps us identify and reduce *Urgent But Not Important* activities and those that are unnecessary or aimless (*Not Urgent, Not Important*). Attending to the latter is what causes almost all *Urgent and Important* events - the crises. Most crises are the effects of earlier, unwise priority-management decisions.

What you decide to include or exclude from your definition of Big Stuff (activities which are always important but should never become urgent), is for you to determine based on how you express your own purpose and vision, your values and assessment of developmental needs. Ideally, we would spend the bulk of our time doing things that are really important but are never urgent: this is the Big Stuff. We'd spend very little time on matters that were neither important nor urgent, and avoid the need to deal with urgent but not important things, or responsibilities that had become both critically important and alarmingly urgent.

Because much of my professional life over the past three decades has involved supporting organisational leaders and managers to become increasingly methodical about their approach to their roles, I've been privy to very many disclosures about how much clarity exists about values, priorities, decision-making and priority management practices in the field. Almost without exception, sooner or later the topic of priority management has arisen as a matter of interest, whatever the reason for the clients' original contact with my business. Few clients used a systematic approach. Of those who did, few were able to articulate it, relying instead on hunch, gut-feel, instinct and intuition – a system in which they could not train others. Few have failed to benefit from being encouraged to take a less improvisational approach.

From that work I've been able to distill a number of practices and processes which seem, pretty much, to constitute a generic list of Big Stuff activities to broadly guide priority management decisions in any organisation. See the Priority Management grid and explanation of it, following.

The Priority Management Grid

HIGH		
URGENCY	<p>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>Urgent and Important</p> <p>Dealing with -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • crises, and emergencies • complaints and malperformance • constantly re-surfacing problems • destructive conflicts • overdue critical projects • damaged relationships • role overlaps, underlaps, confusion • absence of key people through stress-related illness.
	<p>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, complaining, dithering or idle <i>chewing the fat</i>.</p> <p>Anxiety and fretfulness</p> <p>Working outside of own strengths and competence.</p>	<p>Not Urgent, Very Important</p> <p>See the notes following, below.</p>
LOW		
IMPORTANCE		
HIGH		

Whatever Big Stuff you decide to put in the *NUVI* quadrant (Not and preferably never Urgent but Very Important), is entirely up to you.

Generic Big Stuff

However, for very many people the following matters have been found to be characteristically Big Stuff – important matters that should be put first. Typically, they receive far too little attention because the tendency is to become overly-focused on task (doing things), rather than put them within a larger picture and consider the best way to approach them. Even those leaders and managers who consciously put effort into working in the business as well as on the business, often fail to attend to them.

- Clarification of personal life-purpose (our biggest Big Picture).
- Values clarification, visioning, and setting career or life goals (fundamental aspects of the Big Picture).
- Methodical goal-setting, strategic planning, priority-management and self-management.
- Methodical progress-monitoring of *Task*, *Individual* and *Team* to identify improvement opportunities, especially by gathering feedback on others' perception of our own behaviours and service provision.
- Process simplification and improvement.
- Reflecting on experience to learn from it and apply new knowledge to new situations. (Getting off the treadmill long enough to think, learn, and act with greater mindfulness.)
- Empowering (authorising and role-clarifying) and enabling (coaching, up-skilling) others to act.

- Enhancing (monitoring, evaluating, refining, and planning the development of) leadership and self-management practices (to give leadership over what is important to us).
- Enhancing performance management processes and practices..
- Enhancing problem-solving, conflict resolution and coaching practices.
- Enhancing interpersonal relationships skills and practices for 1:1 and group or team purposes.
- Developing constructive relationships.
- Enhancing interdependence and teamwork.

Other Matters Often Overlooked

Many leaders and managers make the prime focus of their priorities for *people-development* the competencies and capacity of other people; and forget to make a priority of developing their own. While a balanced focus on developing ourselves and others is desirable, in order to succeed in our roles we should start with the former. That's pretty much the reason we're advised during 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. Contrast 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. (Unless the organisation is focused on continuous improvement, which means continual change, it is set up to support only the *status quo*.)

Plan to change what you can, to close whatever gaps exist. When planning the contents of your personal *NUVI* quadrant, 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* for -
 - Managing priorities and holding the focus (the subject of this article)
 - "Rising above" problems, stress and challenges
 - Striving for accurate and precise information on which to base decisions and plans
 - Systematic problem-solving
 - Persisting with problem-solving when solutions are not readily apparent
 - Flexibility
 - Metacognition (knowing what we know and don't know; self-monitoring; being aware of, and modifying our own beliefs, thought processes, attitudes and progress)
 - Being creative, imaginative and innovative
 - Finding humour.

We let the urgent crowd out the important, and that's why many organisations are on a perpetual and ever faster-spinning treadmill of operational issues. [Jim Clemmer]

Start Here

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

Establish your personal Big Picture: To connect to your priorities to your Big Picture, first establish your purpose or mission. Some call this our *higher purpose*, or superordinate reason for our existence as we define it, that stands above all else. Only you can define it.

In practice, this may be more challenging than it is to describe. Whenever I have been part of groups working on this task, fewer than 10% are able to say they have already taken this step; for most it is a new and challenging task requiring assistance. Their first attempt at the question, *What is my purpose or mission?* may be entirely puzzling and draw a blank. Alternatively, they may be of this kind initially: *To Be happy; Enjoy life; Make enough money to be comfortable; Raise my children; Be constructive; Make a difference.*

For priority management purposes, greater clarity is better and comes from asking of those answers, further questions such as, *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? Why? How will you know you've made a difference?* and *What for?* When there are no more answers to the questions, we have either reached our *higher purpose statement* for the time being, or (more likely) it's a sign that there's more work to be done on it. Give it time. Schedule regular points at which you will revisit and if necessary refine it, at six-monthly intervals perhaps.

Clarify your role and responsibilities: Next, relate that statement of higher purpose to your business or organisational role, to check alignment and "fit" with it. 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 strategic plan, the business plan, the organisational purpose and the desired organisation culture. If the state of your position description (and/or other relevant documentation) is such that this is difficult or impossible, a fundamental reference-point is missing and you've already identified a priority to be included within your personal *NUVI* Quadrant. If it's clear that your Big Picture is significantly out of alignment with your organisation's purpose and values, you may need to reconsider your employment.

Set your broad goals: At least four-weekly and within the next few days if it's been longer, focus on the achievements you want that will mark, at the end of the year and according to your Purpose or Mission, a successful 12 months. Identify the values, principles, policies, themes and significant behaviour change and development targets (often found in discarded New Year resolution lists) that you may have once set to guide your development and progress. Use 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. If you've no such list, start clarifying and documenting them immediately.

List the incremental steps and check alignment: List the separate objectives and connected small steps you plan to take to accomplish each of your broad goals. Demonstrate to your own satisfaction that there are direct links between what you are currently doing or plan to do in the near future, and the broad goals leading to your Big Picture. (Many proprietary planning systems are available to facilitate this process.) If there are no direct links, something is wrong: you're either on the wrong track (most likely) or your basic planning has overlooked something important. If the latter is true, revisit the earlier steps with this possibility in mind.

Construct a ready-reference and use it: Now, in the light of your role and the outcomes required of you but with special reference to your Big Picture, write within the *NUVI* sector (see the earlier graphic, page 4), those developments, processes, practices, duties and tasks most likely to minimise your spending time on *Urgent and Important* matters.

For practice and as a reality check, you might consider the tasks, issues and other matters you have attended to recently. Figure out which of those have contributed to your Big Picture, (the *Non-urgent, Very Important* sector) and which of them can be characterised as belonging 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.

In your daily routine, whenever you pause to consider the priority you are about to assign to a goal, a plan or a task (such as a meeting – especially meetings), first reference this grid. Use it as your 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 *NUVI* 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. Crises, remember, are often the effects of earlier, unwise priority-management decisions.

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 may be the case for you, consider creating your priority-lists in a *mind-map* or other 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? Not everyone finds this a straightforward process and many find it particularly challenging. It's one of things I commonly attend to during one-to-one mentoring work with clients, because it can be difficult. They often begin by saying, *This is 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!* I remind them that everything stops for dysentery or other illness: we are generally more dispensable than we think. Talk to your coach or mentor. Contact EncourageMentors.com for my support.

According to plan assumes that there is one: If you have not been through this process recently and are too busy to do it now, you're at risk. 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, understanding, processes or practices 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 Where you are currently (an item often completely overlooked). Get feedback from your customers – they can help you establish and understand your development needs.

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