Managing From Priorities

Priorities are your plan for accomplishment. They focus your actions and direct your resources. Truly effective priorities grow out of your inspiration and vision.

-- effective environments

If you have accomplished all that you have planned for yourself, you have not planned enough.

-- Edward Everett Hale,
American Unitarian Clergyman, Writer
1822 - 1909

How often, as a manager, have you wondered where to focus your staff's attention and energies? How do you make sure that what you are doing is consistent with organizational objectives? How do you and your colleagues coordinate and align on the work to be done?

A fundamental technology for addressing these questions is "managing from priorities." This approach can be a powerful management tool that complements our model for managing yourself and others and empowers staff accountability[1]. (Our management model is summarized in the accompanying sidebar.)

For individuals, groups and the organization, monthly and weekly priorities provide a mechanism for following the first principle of our management model: Begin with a clear sense of the results you are after and in what time frame. Clarity on results allows you to focus your resources on achieving them. We are all most effective when we work inside a bigger picture.

In this article we'll explore the nature and technology of "priorities," their role in staff development and their power as a management tool.

What is a "Priority?"

Priorities are your plan for accomplishment. They focus your actions and direct your resources.

A Model for Managing

Our principle-based model for managing is focused on managing for results and empowering people to be accountable.

1. Identify What Is Important

- What do you want to accomplish?
- What results do you want to produce?
- What difference will those results make?
- How will you know when you have succeeded?

2. Make What Is Important Manageable and Do-able

- What different ways are there to make this happen?
- What is your plan for fulfillment?
- What resources are needed (or would be useful) to produce this result?
- What are the major milestones and timeline?

3. Make Choices That Reflect What Is Important

- Are you making choices consistent with your plan and your objectives?
- What other choices might you make?
- What would it take for you to do that?

4. Invent Practices That Support Effectiveness

- How will you make sure this turns out?
- What new practices could make a difference in your effectiveness?

Priorities are most effective when (a) they have been formulated with specific reference to year-long (or longer) objectives, and (b) they are clearly understood and the product of a consensus among all personnel involved in their fulfillment.

Advantages of working from priorities

The advantages of working from priorities include:

- Providing a method and a structure for generating department-wide (or group) priorities and fostering department-wide support for their completion,

- Providing a framework for individuals to identify their priorities inside a shared understanding about the results to be produced and who is accountable for them,

- Monitoring the status of individual projects on a weekly and monthly basis and providing feedback for employee performance evaluation, and

- Encouraging a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction on an individual and department-wide basis.

The Process of Setting Priorities

The true starting point for creating and working from priorities is a review of the long-term accomplishments for the group and organization. Individual long-term accomplishments inform priorities for each person.

Design monthly and weekly priorities for the appropriate "business units" (company, department, group, etc.) that are consistent with the long-term and that take into account the current progress in their fulfillment. Once these priorities have been set, each employee creates individual priorities for the month and for each week. Individual priorities are established within, and informed by, the larger group priorities. Weekly priorities are created each week and never for more than one week at a time.

This approach gives managers a clear sense of what their direct reports are working on, and -- by implication -- what projects are not at the forefront of activity. If a key project must be brought to the front burner, the manager can make a timely correction.

Similarly, employees can focus on the priorities established, in conjunction with their managers, with confidence that the priorities define "the winning game" for the week.

Managers may ask for end-of-week, or end-of-month, reports on the status of priorities and use those reports to determine what is needed next. Such reports can reveal:

• Whether projects are on track

• If projects are not on track, what is missing?

• What are the next actions?

• What issues must be resolved?

• How effective is the employee in producing promised results?

When employee effectiveness appears low, a face-to-face meeting between manager and employee should illuminate what happened, what's missing, and what steps are next. Such a meeting is both productive and supportive: Both parties are focussing on the result to be produced and how to make it happen, rather than on recrimination or excuses.

Initiating the practice of working from priorities

To utilize the tool of working from priorities:

1. Begin by identifying the company-wide and department-wide strategic objectives for the coming 12-month period (or longer).

2. Have discussions with your staff about their individual roles and accountabilities during that same time frame and have them identify interim milestones, accomplishments or projects.

3. Set up a simple procedure for staff to follow in submitting their priorities to their managers. The procedures would include both (a) the priorities they will work from during the month or week and (b) the manner in which they will report on the results of those priorities.

Remember:

Designing and working from priorities is both a practice and a learning experience. Its value will improve with use if it is regarded as a tool rather than a bludgeon.

Footnote

[1] See *Nonprofit Notes,* Issue 2, Fall 2002

Steps for Creating Powerful Priorities

The process for creating and working from powerful priorities is as follows:

• Review your annual or long-term accomplishments and identify the status of each.

• Review your projects and project milestones. Identify work for this month and include it in your priorities.

• Think about all areas of your life and ask yourself if there is anything you want to invent as a priority this month.

• Write each priority with a verb and write the priority as an ACCOMPLISHMENT THAT INSPIRES YOU AND OTHERS!

• Identify specific actions to take to ensure that your priorities are completed. List them with a "by when" date.

• At the end of the month (or week) "complete" your priorities. Review each one and acknowledge what happened.

• Design priorities for the next month (or week) based on the current status of each accomplishment.

• Abandon an "all or nothing" mentality. Identify "lesser included" accomplishments that are do-able AND satisfying.

• Resist the urge to sandwich everything into this time frame.

Priorities and Effective Action

Once you have designed your priorities, use them to stay in effective action.

• Clearly envision all outcomes (e.g., the report is complete, it is impeccable, it is on time, it has input from everyone who needs to provide input, and YOU are in great shape at the end of it all!)

• Schedule appointments with yourself to get work done; honor those appointments. If they get bumped, reschedule them immediately.

• Identify bite-sized (do-able) pieces of work to keep projects moving forward and to avoid being daunted. Don't bite off more than you can chew.

Q & A

How are my priorities different from my "to do" list?

Two fundamental differences involve scope and level of detail. Your 'to do " list is a list of all the discrete actions you plan to take across some period of time -- or as far out into the future as you care to look. In a "to do" list, all actions are equal and each usually lacks a context. You may have no immediate sense of what difference it makes to take the action.

Priorities, on the other hand, are statements of importance and of accomplishment in the fulfillment of a longer term objective. Your priorities represent your choice about what is important in the next period of time (week, month, quarter). Priorities carve out territory and focus thinking, energy and resources. And, ultimately, each requires action. So, priorities are the place to look to determine which actions to take -- i.e., which actions will contribute in a leveraged way to the fulfillment of your larger intentions.

Do you have a question or topic you would like us to address in a future issue? Send us an e-mail, fax or letter. While we can't promise to address every question or topic, we do want to hear from you and will respond as fully as space permits.