

## The Problem with Priorities.

June 2011 Newsletter

### Key Takeaways

- ✦ Narrow your list of priorities. The more you have, the less likely it is that any one of them will get done.
- ✦ If your company doesn't narrow the list for you, then it's incumbent upon you to force the issue.
- ✦ Jim Collins' "stop-doing" list applies equally to individual tasks as well as projects, initiatives, and "priorities." Think about what you won't do in order to ensure that the key strategic issues are addressed.

Ron Ashkenas posted a thoughtful [piece](#) on the problem with priorities last year. He tells a story of the head of a large hospital who asked his direct reports to make an index card for each of the projects they were working on. One hundred fifty cards (!) later, it became apparent why so few of the projects were moving towards completion — with so many projects drawing on the same resources of time and attention, nothing could get finished. Moreover, these senior managers were reluctant to formally drop any of the projects because they felt that all of them were important.

But as the old saying goes, if everything is a priority, then nothing is.

I've written [before](#) about the necessity of understanding your "production capacity." If you had infinite time and infinite resources (energy, money, focus), you wouldn't really need to worry about your production capacity. You'd just keep working and get everything done. You'd get to your daughter's soccer game, help your colleague with his presentation, and analyze last month's sales figures. No problem.

Unfortunately, you don't have infinite time and resources. (Or if you did, you wouldn't be working right now. You'd be on a yacht docked at your own private Caribbean island enjoying cocktail hour with supermodels and Richard Branson.) So you have to make choices. You have to choose your priority for the hour or day or week or year.

It helps if your management has the discipline to cull the list of initiatives and define true priorities. But if it doesn't, then it's incumbent upon you to force the issue: list all of your

accumulated projects and correlate it with the company's stated strategic objectives. Ask your boss which ones are "needs" and which ones are "wants."

The tendency, of course, is to say that the company needs all of them. However, to paraphrase [Orwell](#), "All priorities are equal, but some are more equal than others."

This approach is closely related to Jim Collins' "stop doing" list, which I've written about before. You can't do everything -- just because you can put everything on your list doesn't mean you should. So it's your responsibility to force the decision about what to do and what not to do. If you don't, you run the risk of not getting anything done.

Little's Law states that the more stuff you cram into a process, the longer it takes for any individual task to get done. (See Pete Abila's perspicuous blog post on this topic [here](#).) This law isn't just true on the micro, individual process level. It's also true on the macro, organizational level. Not coincidentally, think about what one of the most storied CEOs of modern times, Jack Welch, did: he had GE exit all the businesses in which it couldn't be #1 or #2. Talk about a "stop doing" list.

As a mentor of mine says, it's better to move three things forward a mile than a hundred things forward an inch. That means you have to take a hard look at all those "priorities" and determine what's really going to get done.

The choice is yours.

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