

Priorities

The Blood, Sweat, and Tears of Strategy

by Jon Craighead

There's this joke about a drunk walking on a snowy, icy day with a bottle of his favorite whiskey in his back pocket. He slips and falls and, feeling a warm liquid emanating from his pocket, he looks to the sky and cries out, "Please God, let that be blood!" Clearly this poor fellow knew what his priorities were. And even if many of us would not share his particular choice, it is nevertheless important that we too have a clear sense of our own priorities.

In my experience talking with business leaders about strategy, few have difficulty connecting to its possibilities. On the other hand, when the subject of implementation arises, the inspiration begins to wane. Leaders today must deal with the demands of an awakening market place. This requires that they know the relative importance of all the elements involved while remaining aware of which actions will move the organization forward. Strategy supplies the outline for success; priorities determine the action necessary to achieve that success.

I view this blending of strategy and priorities as inseparable in the management process. Normally, goal-setting takes place at a 50,000-foot level. Priorities, however, are set at ground level where leaders are dealing with details and must continuously determine appropriate actions and sort through the consequences of each option.

Setting the right priorities is often difficult – but it is essential. The right priorities determine the appropriate actionable drivers, which are the keys to efficient execution. The successful outcomes of these drivers require assigning the appropriate allocation of resources such as people, time and money for the highest probability of success. Too many priorities (initiatives) may sabotage the strategy and confuse your personnel. The toughest job is choosing which among the many alternatives to push forward and which to set aside or outright eliminate – as difficult as it may be to eliminate our pet projects and ideas – for the overall success of the organization. This is about moving the organization from confusion and uncertainty to specific and measurable objectives with speed and accuracy.

It is critical that priorities are clearly communicated and continuously followed through. This keeps what's important front and center and avoids the "slipping through the cracks" syndrome. Ram Charan, in his book [Know-How: The 8 Skills that Separate People Who](#)

Perform from Those Who Don't, points out that without setting priorities, people are apt to try to do everything, wasting precious time, energy and resources on things that aren't important. He urges us to keep certain points in mind as we set priorities, such as: Are they important? Urgent? Long-term versus short-term? Realistic or visionary? He cautions that having too many priorities is the same as having no priorities. Moreover, executing priorities, he says, requires constant repetition and discipline with efficient communication to insure that everyone understands them, buys into them, and is following them without deviation.

What solutions should we employ to assure effective priority selection? In their article titled "Which Initiatives Should You Pursue," Alan Brache and Sam Bodley-Scott make the following suggestions:

- Develop project prioritization criteria aligned with your strategy.
- Analyze resource capacity – what's available, what's repetitious, and what's shareable?
- Gather information on existing projects. What are the related synergies?
- Evaluate the project portfolio. Which projects should get the green light or be shelved?
- Implement a project management process for ongoing review and prioritization.

The article also outlines four useful priority categories:

1. Mission-critical: Most deserving of precious resources at this time.
2. Important: Will pursue now but with less emphasis than initiatives deemed mission-critical.
3. Wait-listed: Will tackle as soon as resources are freed up from initiatives in categories 1 and 2.
4. On Hold: Will not undertake or plan at this time.

It's sometimes necessary to choose priorities which are unpopular but are important to attain the strategy. More so than goals, priorities hit people where they live on an everyday basis and are highly visible and impactful. This challenge necessitates creating alignment throughout the organization. This is especially true for those who will carry out the decisions. It's very important to include these essential personnel in the decision-making activity – this brings additional strength to the process and is indispensable in assuring the intended outcomes of this essential responsibility.