

# SIGMA

## Leadership Series



# Great Leaders Prioritize



## GREAT LEADERS PRIORITIZE

“ The key is not to prioritize what's on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities.   
 – Stephen Covey

There never seems to be enough time in the day to accomplish everything that needs to get done. With many competing demands on time, it may feel like every task is urgent. The feeling of “putting out fires” makes it difficult to determine which tasks should be completed first and which are able to wait. This issue is especially salient for leaders, who are not only responsible for determining their own priorities, but also the priorities of their direct reports.<sup>1</sup> It can be overwhelming for leaders as they try to ensure their team meets deadlines and goals.

Prioritizing involves identifying critical tasks and managing them without getting distracted by less important matters. In the workplace, prioritizing is the process of deciding what needs to be done, when, and by whom. Prioritizing effectively prevents the last-minute scramble as key deadlines approach. Skilled leaders can use prioritization to reduce team stress and improve productivity within their organization. Leaders can also serve as role models, setting an example for how work should be managed and helping to foster a culture where employees at all levels of an organization understand the importance and benefits of effective prioritization.

In assessing your ability to prioritize effectively, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I set realistic goals for what I can accomplish each week?
- Does my time spent on tasks match their importance and relevance to my goals?
- Do I track my progress on all ongoing tasks?
- Am I using my time well when I am at work?
- Do I struggle to meet deadlines?

### Improve Your Prioritizing Skills

**Start by setting goals:** Before you consider your to-do list, you should first reflect on your goals. Think about your aspirations for your own individual performance or career objectives, your team’s performance, or your organization’s bottom line. Then, take a close look at your ongoing projects. How do these tasks contribute to your goals? Which projects are most important in light of what you hope to accomplish? This can help you determine where to focus efforts first.

**Make use of a to-do list:** Once you have reflected on your individual, team, and organization-level goals, you can use them to inform your weekly objectives. Start by finding time in your schedule to plan your intentions for the week, such as Monday morning or Friday afternoon. Setting specific intentions for your work will make the important tasks clear and will allow you not to get preoccupied by distracter tasks. It is harder to plan each day as you go, as you may already be too caught up in the bustle of the workweek to see the ‘bigger picture’.

**Consider both urgency and importance:** Research tells us that multitasking is a myth. Only one task can receive your full, undivided attention at a time.<sup>2</sup> However, it can be a challenge to decide where to dedicate your attention first when you have a long list of tasks to complete. Consider each task in turn. Ask yourself, is this task urgent? Is this task important? Focus your attention first on items that are critical both in terms of timing and impact. Once you complete these tasks, move on to tasks that are important but not urgent. If a task is not important, ask yourself if it needs to be done at all, or if the item can be delegated to someone else.

## Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Prioritize More Effectively

The following steps can help you become better at prioritizing:

1. **Set aside “proactive” time.** As stated above, tasks should be considered both by urgency and importance. We tend to prioritize urgent tasks, and this results in tasks that are important but not time-sensitive falling to the wayside. This may lead to strategic planning and innovation being put on hold, as they typically do not align with current client projects or urgent goals, although they do result in critical long-term outcomes. Setting aside proactive time for important but not time-sensitive projects can lead to more efficient work and may help reduce stress.<sup>3</sup> If possible, try to avoid calls, emails, or scheduling meetings during this time to give your full attention to these tasks.
2. **Break down large tasks.** A common roadblock to prioritizing is feeling overwhelmed by the sheer amount of work that needs to get done. One way to ease these feelings is to break your workload into manageable chunks. Organizing your ongoing projects into smaller sections will help you to track your progress more clearly and stay focused. This can involve looking for opportunities to delegate tasks and setting realistic deadlines for ongoing projects. This approach can be used if you are at the beginning of a project and are unsure of where to start, are at the middle of a project and cannot yet see the finish line, or are nearing the end of a project and need extra help organizing the final tasks.
3. **Anticipate being busy.** These days, it seems that busy is the norm. It can be difficult to stay focused on important goals when so many tedious tasks come up during the week. One way to set yourself up for success during particularly busy weeks is to automate those tedious tasks ahead of time.<sup>4</sup> This can include setting up weekly meetings so that you do not waste time scheduling, arranging routine tasks, keeping an inbox, etc. Anticipating and designing for busyness will help you to prioritize your goals during heavier weeks and to spend less time on the inevitable small tasks that arise.

## Resources



[An ER Doctor on How to Triage your Busy Life](#)



[Getting Your Team to Do More Than Meet Deadlines](#)



Develop your ability to prioritize by taking advantage of SIGMA's coaching services.

Contact SIGMA for coaching on developing your skills as a leader.

SIGMA Assessment Systems, Inc.

Email: [support@SigmaHR.com](mailto:support@SigmaHR.com)

Call: 800-265-1285

## References

<sup>1</sup> Goswami, I., & Urminsky, O. (2021). Don't fear the meter: How longer time limits bias managers to prefer hiring with flat fee compensation. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 162, 42-58. 10.1016/j.obhdp.2020.10.016.

<sup>2</sup> Dux, P. E., Ivanoff, J., Asplund, C. L., & Marois, R. (2006). Isolation of a central bottleneck of information processing with time-resolved fMRI. *Neuron*, 52(6), 1109-1120.

<sup>3</sup> Blank, C., Giurge, L. M., Newman, L., & Whillans, A. (2019). Getting your team to do more than meet deadlines. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2019/11/getting-your-team-to-do-more-than-meet-deadlines>

<sup>4</sup> Long, D. (2019, Dec). An ER doctor on how to triage your busy life [Video]. TED Conferences. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fe1z22\\_Qd9E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fe1z22_Qd9E)