

# Practicing Prioritization

For small and growing organizations facing many demands on their time and resources, keeping focused is always a major challenge. All too often, organizations become overwhelmed or exhausted trying to respond to every issue, problem, or invitation. An ability to prioritize can be what sets great organizations apart from others. Exceptional organizations set ambitious goals and regularly achieve or exceed them. This requires strong leaders who keep their teams focused on the right goals, and who manages them to deliver results.

Staying focused requires an ability to **prioritize**, the discipline to **say 'no,'** and a keen attention to the value of one's most precious resource: **time**.

**Prioritization** is about investing your time in doing the most important things for your organization.

To do this, you need to do two things:

1

Set the right goals and targets.

2

Hold yourself accountable for delivery.

**TO PRIORITIZE EFFECTIVELY**, think about both long-term and short-term goals, and plan your work around both.



## Long-term | Annual goals

**Identify** the most important things you need to accomplish in 12 months.

**Think** about the most critical challenges to your organization.

**List** your major goals for the year, focus on what is actually achievable.

**Review** these goals at a set time with a board chair or a key team member, at least once per month.

**Be explicit** about what you are not going to prioritize; this helps to reinforce that you are making a choice about how you use your limited time.

TIP

Print out a list of your top goals for the year and pin them on your wall where you and your team can see them regularly. Reminding yourself of your big goals for the year every day is a good way to keep them in clear focus.



## Mid-term | Quarterly goals

For each major year-end goal, identify what needs to happen in each quarter to verify that you are making the necessary progress to be successful at the end of the year.

**Setting clear targets** each quarter can help move work forward and keep teams aligned on their efforts.

Review progress against annual goals and set clear targets for the quarter ahead. In a couple of hours, you can clearly track your progress, identify challenges, and set a plan for the team.



## Short-term | Weekly goals

Get your team to **develop, share, and update** their goals weekly, and do so publicly to add an element of accountability.

At Maliasili, all team members take about five minutes to develop and share weekly goals every Monday. New goals are posted on a shared online platform at the start of the week, and the goals from the previous week are reviewed and updated so all team members can see progress.

Focus on five goals for the week. There are always other tasks and activities that need to get done every week. While those still take place, the weekly goals help team members think carefully about how they spend their time.



## MAKING TIME

Time is the most essential resource for any busy and ambitious leader, and unfortunately time is a finite resource that must be used strategically. Finding ways to optimize time every day, week or month is key to staying productive and achieving your goals.

Here are five simple ways to optimize time and help you get more done:

- 1 DO LESS.** If you don't have enough time to work on your priorities, you're probably doing too much. Stop doing things that are not absolutely critical. Look at what you did over the past week and ask yourself what you could have eliminated without compromising your most critical goals.
- 2 DELEGATE.** Create more time by handing over some of your tasks and responsibilities to others.
- 3 ELIMINATE WASTE.** Often, we are not as efficient as we could be. For example, are meetings always necessary or managed in way that makes the best use of time? Are there ways to get your work done faster and eliminate wasted time? Try to reduce these inefficiencies to free up more time.
- 4 MATCH EFFORT TO VALUE.** Consider how much time and effort you spend on each task or project and make sure the cost of time invested is worth the benefits created from the result. We often expend too much time and energy on less consequential activities. Think about major uses of time and ask yourself if these activities generate sufficient value to you and your organization.
- 5 PHASE.** Not everything has to be done at once. Often work can be broken down into multiple phases and spread over time. This can reduce the pressure of what needs to be done in the near term.

## SAY 'NO'

A key to staying focused and productive is the ability to say 'no.' This can be difficult as it requires self-discipline, and may also involve disappointing people who want you to do things for them. But effective leaders have to become great at saying 'no,' because the more effective and influential you become, the more you will be asked to do things for others. Warren Buffet, a legendary financial investor, once said:

*"The difference between successful people and really successful people is that really successful people say no to almost everything."*

**TIP** Look back on the trips you took and the meetings you attended over the past year. Trips and meetings can take up a huge amount of time. Were they all good uses of your time? Did they all help you advance your critical organizational priorities? Which ones could you have said 'no' to, looking back? Create some criteria for things that you say 'yes' to, setting some high standards, and then say 'no' to everything else.