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Setting priorities

Six ideas that you can use, every day, to help you set priorities and keep you working at your best.

by **Brian Tracy**

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In 1970, sociologist Dr. Edward Banfield of Harvard University wrote a book entitled *The Unheavenly City*. He described one of the most profound studies on success and priority setting ever conducted. Banfield's goal:

> ***To find out how and why some people became financially independent during the course of their working lifetimes.***

He started off convinced that the answer to this question would be found in factors such as family background, education, intelligence, influential contacts, or some other concrete factor. What he finally discovered was that the major reason for success in life was a particular attitude of mind.

Banfield called this attitude "long time perspective." He said that men and women who were the most successful in life and the most likely to move up economically were those who took the future into consideration with every decision they made in the present. He found that the longer the period of time a person took into consideration while planning and acting, the more likely it was that he would achieve greatly during his career.

For example, one of the reasons your family doctor is among the most respected people in America is because he or she invested many years of hard work and study to finally earn the right to practice medicine. After

university courses, internship, residency and practical training, a doctor may be more than 30 years old before he or she is capable of earning a good living. But from that point onward, these men and women are some of the most respected and most successful professional people in the United States. They had long time perspectives.

> ***The essential key to success in setting priorities is having a long time perspective. You can tell how important something is today by measuring its potential future impact on your life.***

For example, if you come home from work at night and choose to play with your children or spend time with your spouse, rather than watch TV or read the paper, you have a long time perspective. You know that investing time in the health and happiness of your children and your spouse is a very valuable, high-priority use of time.

If you take additional courses in the evening to upgrade your skills and make yourself more valuable, you're acting with a long time perspective. Learning something practical and useful can have a long-term effect on your career.

The key word, then, to keep in mind when you're setting priorities is sacrifice. Setting priorities usually requires sacrificing present enjoyment for future enjoyment. It requires giving up a short-term pleasure in the present in order to enjoy a far greater and more substantial pleasure in the future.

Economists say that the inability to delay gratification— that is, the natural tendency of individuals to spend everything they earn plus a little bit more, and the mind-set of doing what is fun, easy and enjoyable— is the primary cause of economic and personal failure in life. On the other hand, disciplining yourself to do what you know is right and important, although difficult, is the highroad to pride, self-esteem and personal satisfaction.

So, setting priorities begins with your deciding what you want most in life and then organizing your time and activities, so that everything you do is the most valuable use of your time in achieving those objectives.

With your larger, long-term priorities in order, you can much more easily decide upon your short-term priorities.

You can say that the process of setting short-term priorities begins with a pad of paper and a pen. Whenever you feel overwhelmed by too many things to do and too little time in which to do them, sit down, take a deep breath, and list all those tasks you need to accomplish. Although there is never enough time to do everything, there is always enough time to do the most important things, and to stay with them until they are done right.

Peter Drucker once said, “Efficiency is doing things right, but effectiveness is doing the right things.” And this requires thought. Once you have listed your tasks, ask yourself this question: “If I were to be called out of town for a month, and I could finish only one thing on this list, which one thing would it be?” Think it through, and circle that one item on your list. Then ask yourself: “If I could do only one more thing before I was called out of town for a month, what would it be?” This then becomes the second thing you circle on your list.

Perform this exercise five or six times until you have sorted out the highest priorities on your list. Then number each according to its importance. With these priorities, you are now ready to begin working effectively toward the achievement of your major goals.

Another popular method for setting priorities on your list, once you have determined your major goals or objectives, is the A-B-C-D-E method. You place one of those letters in the margin before each of the tasks on your list.

"A" stands for "very important; must do; severe negative consequences if not completed."

"B" stands for "important; should do; but not as important as my 'A' tasks, and only minor negative consequences if not completed."

"C" stands for "nice to do; but not as important as 'A' or 'B,' and no negative consequences for not completing."

"D" stands for "delegate, or assign to someone else who can do the task in my place."

"E" stands for "eliminate, whenever possible."

When you use the A-B-C-D-E method, you can very easily sort out what is important and unimportant. This then will focus your time and attention on those items on your list that are most essential for you to do.

Once you can clearly see the one or two things that you should be doing, above all others...

Just say no to all diversions and distractions and focus single-mindedly on accomplishing those priorities.

Much stress that people experience in their work lives comes from working on low-priority tasks. The amazing thing is that as soon as you start working on your highest-value activity, all your stress disappears. You begin to feel a continuous stream of energy and enthusiasm. As you work toward the completion of something that is really important, you feel an increased sense of personal value and inner satisfaction. You experience a sensation of self-mastery and self-control. You feel calm, confident and capable.

Here are six ideas that you can use, every day, to help you set priorities and to keep you working at your best:

1. Take the time to be clear about your goals and objectives so that the priorities you set are moving you in the direction of something that is of value to you. Remember that many people scramble frantically to climb the ladder of success, only to find that it is leaning against the wrong building.

2. Develop a long time perspective and work on those things in the present that can have the greatest positive impact on your future. Maintain your balance in life by setting priorities in the areas of your health, your personal relationships and your financial goals.

3. Make the commitment to improve those aspects of your life that are most important to you. If you're in sales, learn how to be an excellent salesperson. If you're a parent, learn how to be an outstanding mother or father. The power is always on the side of the person with the best practical knowledge.

4. Be sure to take the time to do your work right the first time. The fewer mistakes you make, the less time you will waste going back and doing it over.

5. Remember that what counts is not the amount of time that you put in overall; rather, it's the amount of time that you spend working on high-priority tasks. You will always be paid for the results that you obtain, not merely the hours that you spend on the job.

6. Understand that the most important factor in setting priorities is your ability to make wise choices. You are always free to choose to engage in one activity or another. You may choose a higher-value activity or a lower-value activity, but once you have chosen, you must accept the consequences of your choice.

Resolve today to set clear priorities in every area of your life, and always choose the activities that will assure you the greatest health, happiness and prosperity in the long term. The long term comes soon enough, and every sacrifice that you make today will be rewarded with compound interest in the great future that lies ahead for you.

Brian Tracy is one of America's leading authorities on the development of human potential and personal effectiveness. He addresses more than 250,000 men and women each year on the subjects of personal and professional development, including the executives and staff of IBM, Deloitte Touche, McDonnell Douglas and The Million Dollar Round Table. His exciting talks and seminars on leadership, sales, management and personal effectiveness bring about immediate changes and long-term results.

Brian has traveled and worked in 90 countries on six continents and speaks four languages. He is an avid reader in management, psychology, economics, metaphysics and history and he brings a unique perspective and style to his talks. He has the remarkable ability to capture and hold audience attention with a fast-moving combination of stories, examples, humor and concrete, practical ideas that get results-fast.

He is the author/narrator of many best-selling audio-cassette programs, including: ***The Psychology of Achievement, Breaking the Success Barrier, The Psychology of Selling, Peak Performance Woman, The Science of Self-Confidence, Thinking Big,*** and ***How to Master Your Time.***

Brian Tracy has produced more than 300 audio and video learning programs covering the entire spectrum of human and corporate performance. These programs, researched and developed for more than 25 years, are some of the most effective learning tools in the world.

Brian is married with four children and lives on a golf course in San Diego. He is active in community affairs and serves on the board of two non-profit organizations.

Visit his website, **Brian Tracy International**, at: BrianTracy.com
and be sure to sign up for one (or all) of his FREE! weekly newsletters:

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