Reprioritizing Work in the Face of Opportunities, Crises and Requests

How can I most effectively reprioritize my work (tasks and projects) when people make unanticipated requests of me, or when I see new opportunities or problems? I can figure out the priority of emergent requests and opportunities if I take the time to reflect on them. But sometimes the "window of opportunity" closes quickly, or the person making a request of me needs or expects a quick answer. How does one rapidly reprioritize well? What habits or tools have you found helpful?

LeaderLetter Web Site

I have found that the tool attached helps people be very clear how they set priorities. If you have the criteria internalised, then it is easy to decide if a new task is worth doing or not.
(I posted Nick's document on my webpage: http://www.wright.edu/~scott.williams/LeaderLetter/priorities.doc ... also see Nick's webpage: http://homepage.ntlworld.com/nick.heap)

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At least where I work, new requests and crises come in all the time. I am the Database Administrator for Sinclair Community College. The utmost important thing is to keep the system running correctly. This means that many times I have to drop what I am doing to fix something that broke or is perceived to be broken. In the non-crisis mode, you need to keep the user/clients informed on what is going on and what the opportunities and requests that are currently on the table at any given time. Keeping your direct clients informed on what your current set of priorities are is very important. This will give them a feel of when they can expect to see their requests being answered and also will let them inform you of their needs (what might seem to you as a low priority can seem to them a high priority). In short, communications will balance the two sets of expectations (yours and the client's) thus giving a constantly changing set of priorities that all can understand (if not agree upon).

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If I get a rush request from my superior, I immediately conclude if I need
data/assistance from another person or dept and send out a request at once
to get going. Then I actually schedule some time on my planner to get it
done and in per deadline. It is also helpful if you leave several hours
per week open on your schedule for unplanned requests or personnel issues.

First, with unanticipated requests, I make a quick judgment as to whether I will even handle the request. There are times, when I have to say:

- no (unless it's my boss)
- not now, but later (then I will place it within my prioritized tasks at a place which allows me to respond to it)
- or I may delegate it -- to my staff, or I may recommend it go to another, more appropriate department.

If it is a task that I (1) should handle and (2) can handle -- and I choose to (or have to) handle it at that moment, I make a judgment as to how much time it will take. If it can be done in a short period of time (30 minutes or less), then -- if I am at a point where I can stop -- I most likely will leave my priorities as they are and insert this task at the current spot. If it is going to take longer, I judge it for it's priority and insert it at the appropriate spot on my list. With the above scenarios, I normally don't need to completely re-prioritize my list -- everything is:

- handled as planned, or
- shifted down one notch, or
- the unanticipated task is put in the list at it's appropriate spot -- all tasks above it stay as they are, and those below it are shifted down one spot.

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My answer is not very technical. I ask myself these questions.

   Is it for a customer?
   Is this customer more important than current customer concerns.
   What is the financial impact to my business?
   How does this compare to current tasks?
   Does my current workload and schedule allow for it to be inserted as a
   higher priority?
   If not can it be effectively delegated to make the most of my
   organization's time and skills?

In answer to the survey question I am only responding to the impact on business. I will tell you now if a family member or friend is severely injured or sick they are #1 priority.

I first look at the impact this will have on the customer or the company. If it is high it takes first priority.

Then I look at my other tasks and prioritize as to what can "slip" and not have an impact and what cannot.

I also have a rule of keeping my time at work 80% full. It sounds counter productive but at 100% you cannot tolerate change,
interruptions, or fires and you are not a team player or effective over all.

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Even though we may not have much time to reflect on sudden demands or opportunities, we must make some sort of snap value judgment regarding them. Hopefully you are familiar enough with your job and your company to be able to make these snap judgments when necessary. First we must identify how urgent or important the issue is and how soon it must be addressed. Does it take precedence over items you are currently working on? If a big sales presentation is suddenly moved up a couple of days, it is probably imperative that you put other things aside to work on it. If you are a builder and a Client has water running into his basement, you have to address the issue immediately. If she has a light fixture that isn't working properly, the issue can probably wait a few hours or days. Sometimes the issue can be addressed by someone else in the organization - delegate if you can. Other times, someone else can start the project, and you can finish it as time becomes available. Other times someone else can do the bulk of the project, and you may just need to review it. Don't be afraid to ask for help. One thing is for sure, you must make a decision one way or the other. Don't be afraid to say no if warranted.

How do I effectively reprioritize my work?

I believe that this process is driven by the organization that you currently work for/in. We, as individual managers/supervisors, evaluate our organization and determine which method works best for us. In the current structure I work in I reprioritize based on the level of the individual presenting the request..... a manager trumps a supervisor, a director trumps a manager, my boss trumps them all, etc. In my previous employment situation my boss expected me to ask all the necessary questions of the individual making the request and then prioritize based on my own determination. I, of course, had to be prepared to justify my decision and usually I felt very comfortable in doing this.

I prefer the second method to the first as it has always made more sense to me. I have always believed that we are better off making the decision, explaining that decision, learning from potential mistakes and moving forward. This method is the one that makes us stronger as individual employees and in the long run results in fewer repercussions.

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Can you do what you are being asked to do in less time than it will take to think, plan and organizing to do it?

If so, and it makes sense to do it, just do it and save all the organizing time. Sometimes I spend more time thinking about what I have to do and when I'll do it than it takes to do it. Usually I do this with things I don't like doing but have to do.

Consider how the request fits with your key objectives. If it fits make time for it. If it doesn't say no.

Review the past few months to see how many things you said yes to that you should have said no to. From that adjust accordingly.

Bottom line, saying no too often does more damage to your reputation than saying yes to often does.

I find keeping a physical or mental "to do" list is a necessity. Then, as projects/tasks are handed to me I can quickly figure out what I need to do first before I start on the new task. I also find that when I am feeling overwhelmed, placing smaller important projects in between large projects seems to break things up. I can work on one large and 2 or 3 small tasks at once. The skill to learn is juggling. I find a lot, though, when educated people have to ask themselves this question, they have too much on their plate. It is time to either delegate some of the work out, or stop accepting new projects. I am the worst when it comes to saying "no", especially to a superior, so I guess in effect taking control of your time management is also a skill. I am currently in the midst of 2 large projects amongst my daily tasks. The first is designing a new student registration form and the second is combining course inventory forms. In addition I have to complete my normal day to day tasks including emails, student services, verification letters, degree acceptances, and some other minor duties. I do not have any time to myself that I am not accessible to students. Therefore, my challenge is doing my work amidst being interrupted on a consistent basis.

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Just a thought....Before I would change my priorities and force a re-schedule of my work I would ask the person making the request of me some questions to ascertain if there is a sense of urgency. Also, I might ask them up front if we can work out a time for me to be involved at a later date or time. If their issue is urgent ... I would have to at least know what they have done to address the problem before I would take it on and what their expectations would be of me in terms of time and resources. I would try to do this politely because it may just be their sense of urgency is due to their poor planning and if I help them...I may become their eternal crutch...If the entire organization is affected by this request...and my help is needed...be damned the schedule...all hands on deck...

Step 1 - does it fit your vision

1. A very clear understanding and belief in your personal DNA - core values and beliefs.
2. A very clear following of your North Star - your purpose.
3. A well defined mountain that you want to climb and the time frame you want to accomplish it in - mission.

So, determine if the task falls within your DNA, fits your North Star and will support your mission. If it does not touch any of those three, don't touch it! If it does, move to Step 2.

Step 2 - testing for authenticity

1. Consciously chosen and given thoughtful consideration for full value impact and what you can contribute. (Remember when you asked me to be on the WOASTD board? This is where I hit the wall in determining if I could contribute and make a commitment.)
2. Does the task give your purpose clear support?
3. Will the task give you energy, enthusiasm and motivation? Nothing worst than a task that sucks the life blood out of you and derails your mission.
4. Free you from the circumstance.
5. Realistic task that challenges and can move you and the organization forward?

I check and prioritize my day first thing in the morning (@ 5 AM). My "to-do" list is broken into about 6 categories. Each category is prioritized according to important/urgent, important/not urgent, not important/ urgent (delegate) not important/not urgent (delegate or pitch).

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I already have who I give my top priority to and generally on down the line. If there is a conflict, then I defer to the top priority -- will this requested task interfere with me meeting my #1 priority? It takes dedicating some time to list out and think about the amount of time things will take really. I can't say I'm the best at it either. If there is a "trick" to the trade, I'd be interested too!

Scott, On occasion I get requests requiring rapid responses and on occasion I ask for rapid responses. A rule of thumb I often make is related to money. Example: if someone wants me to edit a grant (which is a request often made of me) I try to drop everything and do what they request. If it is not money related, I consider the level of importance (from my perspective) and respond accordingly. Also, I have organized my life in a way that I am not under the gun to get things done...and I often meet deadlines a week or two in advance, so an immediate request or a "rapid" request is somewhat easier for me to accommodate than in times past. Also, I have an attitude of "I want to help" (which is a requirement for my job) so again, it is not too upsetting for me to drop everything and help. And, when I cannot meet the request because of time constraints, I try to let go of the frustration asap and go on with the work at hand.

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I use two methods that require little analysis.

1. Covey method, importance vs. urgency quadrant trying to balance what is very important and not urgent along with what is very urgent and very important.
2. Using a Seriousness, Urgency , Growth prioritization method; Seriousness +/- 10% or more profit affecting, Urgency needs attention in the next month vs. next six months, Growth, is the problem growing at a significant rate. You can use a point system and weighting system to complement the analysis.

For me the key to priortizing unexpected, urgent requests (this is specific to my job) is
three-fold:

1) Anticipate issues that may arise and give some thought to how you might handle them if
they do (I know some may say if they are "unexpected'" how do you anticipate them). Many
unexpected issues are unexpected simply because one is ill-prepared, unwilling or
incapable of seeing potential consequences of certain actions.

2) For me experience has been the key in dealing with these types of issues. Things
needing an immediate response do not allow for reflection and the application of reason or
typical problem-solving mechanisms. If I do not possess the requisite experience and time
is of the essence I seek out those who do have the requisite experience.

3)   A cost/benefit analysis, albeit a quick and dirty one, should be done to assess the
consequences of allowing yourself to be diverted from previously planned activities vs. the
consequences of not acting on the "urgent" requests.

In my line of work I face this repeatedly. Nos 1 and 2 above are the most reliable and 3 is
an evil necessity that sometimes leads to choosing the wrong course of action, given 20/20
hindsight.

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I have personally found that people will continue to pile things on you until you say stop. So the first thing a
person has to do is learn to say no and mean it. It is not being mean to say no, you can only do so much. Be
nice but let people know when enough is enough. Secondly being proficient at your job and being an over
achiever can be too different things. The meaning of this is that if you do your work in a timely manner you are
good. However if you are always getting it done early then that can become the norm and what is expected. So
when something happens and you turn things in on what might be considered timely for others it might make
you look bad because it is not your norm. Please do not get me wrong I am not saying do not do your best. What
I am saying is perform at a level that you can perform at on a consistent basis. The third thing I feel you need to
look at is the amount of work you are doing. Are you always getting more work than others or are you just not
getting as much done as they are? If so why? If you are getting more work, then are you really that much better
than they are. If so maybe it is time to ask for a raise. If everyone else is performing the same or better, then
what are they doing that you are not. Next, if you do have to much or more than others, then do not be afraid to
ask for help. This is not a sign of weakness it is a sign of a good manager. You can see when you need help.
The final thing I recommend is WALK AWAY! Sometimes you just need to walk away for a little bit. And I
mean really walk away. Go to the bathroom or breakroom. Take a walk. Also do not just do it physically but
mentally too. Put it all out of your mind for just a few minutes. Do whatever it takes to distract yourself for this
short period of time. You will feel refreshed when you go back to address the work. Now you can start
organizing what you have.

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In some situations, it is possible to "just say no" coupled with a tactful explanation of why you cannot comply
with the request. Too many people accept assignments and suffer the stress and reduced effectiveness that might
have been avoided with a little assertiveness.

In other situations, however, "no" is not acceptable -- if it's your boss, or a customer/client, or someone with
whom you must maintain or rebuild a relationship. In these cases, I have found one or more of the following
tactics useful.

- Most importantly, one's priority list must be kept current, considering both the importance and urgency of each item on the list. With a mental picture of the list, one can quickly place the new assignment into the list. The new task may bump the bottom item off the list. One can often accept that the displaced item will not get done if its priority was low and the consequences are not severe.

- Delegate, or solicit help, for one or more tasks on your list -- even if the task may not be done as well by someone else. Once again, one must consider the risks of possible reduced quality.

- Explain, in accepting the new task, the impact it will have on other commitments you've made to the requester. This is especially useful when the request comes from your boss or a customer and can form the basis for negotiating a resolution.

- Take on the extra work -- even though it means stress, overtime, and/or missing other deadlines -- with the implicit understanding that "now you owe me one." (While this can be manipulative, if it is addressed rationally it is called reciprocity.)

- Suggest an alternative. Creativity and quick-thinking are important here. There may be another way to accomplish the task, or substitute a less demanding task, or move a deadline, or complete the new task if the requester can help with other tasks on your priority list. In one of my projects, for example, the customer made a new request. When I explained my pre-existing commitments, the customer agreed to persuade my boss that another of my deadlines could be moved back.

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