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## From Chaos to Calm: The Experts' Guide to Setting Priorities

By Pat Lynch



One set of skills that is critical in any organization is that of setting, aligning, and implementing priorities. These skills are particularly important in times such as those we have experienced recently, when management has to find effective ways to “re-group” in the aftermath of devastating changes caused by economic conditions.

Particularly in times of chaos or emergency, people seem to want “the” answer to setting priorities in the form of a tool or method that they can apply to whatever situation they have to address at the moment. However, setting priorities is not something that is best done “in the moment,” nor does it lend itself to a single or optimal method. While there are tools that can be used to assist, the fact remains that setting priorities requires you to develop a *process* that enables you to deploy your time and energy most effectively. Such a process can be planned ahead of time and followed as the need arises.

In order to gain some insight into how to set, align, and implement priorities, I conducted a series of interviews with individuals who have expertise in these skills, both first responders (e.g., from law enforcement, the fire service, a worldwide emergency aid agency) and non-first responders (e.g., small business turnaround expert, professional organizer, fighter pilot turned entrepreneur). As I had anticipated, common themes emerged from the experts' unique experiences and perspectives. In addition, none of the experts espoused a specific method or tool; instead all described processes that have worked effectively for them and their respective organizations.

Here are seven of those themes that will inform the process by which you set, align, and implement priorities effectively.

## **1. Identify and communicate a clear vision.**

Without exception, the number one theme is the importance of having and communicating a clear vision – i.e., letting people know *why* they are doing what they are doing. What is the outcome you want? For example, in the case of a fire evacuation, the #1 priority is the safety of the public and the responders. Similarly, staying alive is a fighter pilot's desired outcome.

## **2. Engage in advance planning.**

The experts could not over-emphasize the importance of advance planning. Though “planning” takes on different meanings for the experts depending on the specific contexts in which they operate, the concept is the same. That is, there must be a strategy that is implemented according to the plan you have developed. You must lay the appropriate groundwork, which in addition to developing criteria and courses of action often includes building readiness and improving capabilities.

Planning is especially important when there are multiple organizations involved. Even in a single organization there must be coordination among the various departments. Taking the time during the planning process to identify and remove or minimize obstacles enables people to see the end result more clearly *and* provides immediate forward momentum.

## **3. Build flexibility into your plans and processes.**

Having emphasized the importance of advance planning, the experts agree that the plans allow for flexibility. As one first responder said, although her agency develops strategies for specific emergencies in the form of natural or man-made disasters around the world, they rely heavily on “situational agility” to adapt to each unique incident. That is, the experts know that despite their best efforts at contingency planning, each situation will include unexpected elements that will demand on-the-spot decisions.

Another reason why flexibility is important is that priorities are likely to change over time. As a result, you must recognize and plan for that inevitability. When one process doesn't work effectively, you must be able to acknowledge its shortcomings and try something else. When priorities do change, go back to the vision (Theme #1) to re-set them.

## **4. Develop trusting work relationships.**

Relationships are critical, both within the organization and outside. Especially in emergency situations, one first responder appreciates the fact that when she calls another agency for support, the person at the other end is someone with whom she has an established rapport. There is a huge return on the time you invest in getting to know the people you are working with and/or leading.

**5. Require leaders to set the example they want others to follow.**

Leadership is key. People look to their leaders in time of crisis or chaos and expect them to show the way with courage and conviction. Leaders all need to be on the same page about where they are going and why. During the planning stage, it is incumbent upon the leaders to ensure they have the right people in place to set, align, and implement organizational priorities.

**6. Ensure the commitment of every person involved.**

Every person in the organization must be involved and committed to achieving the designated priorities. To the extent possible, have everyone participate in setting the goals and plan of action. When you do that, implementation is much easier because people “own” the priorities.

**7. Communicate clearly and frequently.**

Communication must be clear, frequent, and pervasive throughout all levels of the organization. Continuous feedback is mandatory. Every individual must be clear about his/her role. Having a common language or vocabulary helps to ensure that there is no doubt about the meaning of the information being conveyed.

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