FACTOR II: OPERATING SKILLS
CLUSTER D: KEEPING ON POINT

50 Priority Setting

I have to constantly juggle being a writer with being a wife and mother. It’s a matter of putting two different things first, simultaneously. Madeleine L’Engle – American author

Section 1: Your Development Need(s)

Unskilled

☐ Has little sense of what’s mission-critical and what’s just nice to do
☐ Doesn’t identify the critical few well for self or others
☐ May believe that everything’s equally important, may overwhelm others with unfocused activities
☐ May be addicted to action, do a little bit of everything quickly
☐ May be a poor time manager
☐ May not say no; wants to do everything
☐ Not good at figuring out how to eliminate a roadblock

Select one to three of the competencies listed below to use as a substitute for this competency if you decide not to work on it directly.

Substitutes: 16,17,24,33,39,40,47,51,52

Skilled

☐ Spends his/her time and the time of others on what’s important
☐ Quickly zeros in on the critical few and puts the trivial many aside
☐ Can quickly sense what will help or hinder accomplishing a goal
☐ Eliminates roadblocks
☐ Creates focus

Overused Skill

☐ May let the trivial many accumulate into a critical problem
☐ May too quickly reject the priorities of others
☐ May have a chilling effect on necessary complexity by requiring everything to be reduced to the simple
☐ May confuse simple with simplistic
☐ May be too dominant a force on priorities for the team

Select one to three of the competencies listed below to work on to compensate for an overuse of this skill.

Compensators: 2,3,12,15,17,27,30,33,38,46,52,63,65

Some Causes

☐ Action junkie; always on the move
☐ Difficulty saying no
□ Ego; overestimate capacity
□ Perfectionist; need to do everything
□ Short attention span; want to do a little bit of everything
□ Time management; too busy to set priorities
□ Trouble choosing

Leadership Architect® Factors and Clusters
This competency is in the Operating Skills Factor (II). This competency is in the Keeping on Point Cluster (D) with: 16. You may want to check other competencies in the same Factor/Cluster for related tips.

The Map
So much to do; so little time in which to do it. Finite resources; infinite needs. People to see, places to go, things to do. No time to say hello, good-bye, I’m late for a very important meeting. Sound familiar? That’s life.
Everyone has more to do than they can get to. Organizations have more opportunities than they have the resources to address. The higher up you go in the organization, the more you have to do and the less time you have to do it. Nobody can do it all. You have to set priorities to survive and prosper.

Section 2: Learning on Your Own
These self-development remedies will help you build your skill(s).

Some Remedies
□ 1. Target out of focus? Be clear about your goals and objectives. What exactly is it you need to accomplish? Use the annual plan and the strategic plan to understand the mission-critical things that must happen. More help? – See #47 Planning and #58 Strategic Agility.

□ 2. Need clarity about what’s mission critical? List goals in order of priority. Using the goals, separate what you need to do into mission-critical, important to get done, nice if there is time left over, and not central to what we are trying to achieve. When faced with choices or multiple things to do, apply the scale and always choose the highest level.

□ 3. Too much busy work? Watch out for the activity trap. John Kotter, in The General Managers, found that effective managers spent about half their time working on one or two key priorities—priorities they described in their own terms, not in terms of what the business/organizational plan said. Further, they made no attempt to work as much on small but related issues that tend to add up to lots of activity. So rather than consuming themselves and others on 97 seemingly urgent and related smaller activities, they always returned to the few issues that would gain the most mileage long term.
4. Have a point of view? Get help from others. When faced with multiple good things to do, pass them by a few others around you for their opinion. You don’t have to do what they say but having other perspectives is always better than having only your opinion. More help? – See #33 Listening.

5. Need to get started? Take action. Many times setting and operating on priorities isn’t a reflective task. You may not have much time for ruminating. Most of life’s choices have to be made on the spot, without all of the data. Nobody is ever right all the time under that kind of pressure. Perfectionists have a problem with this. Wait as long as you can and then shoot your best shot. More help? – See #16 Timely Decision Making and #32 Learning on the Fly.

6. Focused on what you like? Don’t play favorites. Be careful not to be guided by just what you like and what you don’t like. That way of selecting priorities will probably not be successful over time. Use data, intuition and even feelings, but not feelings alone.

7. Time to choose? Weigh your options. When you are stuck, write down the pros and cons for each option. Check what effect each would have both on the short and long term. Are there cost differences? Is one resource more efficient than the other? Is one apt to be more successful than the other? Think about the interaction of both short- and long-term goals. Sometimes what you decide to do today will hurt you or the organization downstream. When making either a short-term or long-term choice, stop for a second and ask what effect this might have on the other. Adjust as necessary. More help? – See #65 Managing Vision and Purpose.

8. No time? Be time sensitive. Taking time to plan and set priorities actually frees up more time later than just diving into things hoping that you can get it done on time. Most people out of time claim they didn’t have the time to plan their time. In the Stephen Covey Seven Habits of Highly Effective People sense, it’s sharpening your saw. More help? – See #62 Time Management.


10. Time waster? Be sensitive to the time of others. Generally, the higher up you go or the higher up the person you are interacting with is, the less time you and he/she have. Be time efficient with others. Use as little of their time as possible. Get to it and get done with it. Give them an opportunity to open new avenues for discussion or to continue but if they don’t, say your good-byes and leave.
Section 3: Learning from Feedback

*These sources would give you the most accurate and detailed feedback on your skill(s).*

- **1. Direct Boss**
  
  Your direct boss has important information about you, your performance, and your prospects. The challenge is to get this information. There are formal processes (e.g., performance appraisals). There are day-to-day opportunities. To help, signal your boss that you want and can handle direct and timely feedback. Many bosses have trouble giving feedback, so you will have to work at it over a period of time.

- **2. Direct Reports**
  
  Across a variety of settings, your direct reports probably see you the most. They are the recipients of most of your managerial behaviors. They know your work. They can compare you with former bosses. Since they may hesitate to give you negative feedback, you have to set the atmosphere to make it easier for them. You have to ask.

- **3. Past Associates/Constituencies**
  
  When confronted with a present performance problem, some claim, “I wasn’t like that before; it must be the current situation.” When feedback is available from former associates, about 50% support that claim. In the other half of the cases, the people were like that before and probably didn’t know it. It sometimes makes sense to access the past to clearly see the present.

Section 4: Learning from Develop-in-Place Assignments

*These part-time develop-in-place assignments will help you build your skill(s).*

- Plan a new site for a building (plant, field office, headquarters, etc.).
- Assign a project with a tight deadline to a group.
- Manage a temporary group of “green,” inexperienced people as their coach, teacher, guide, mentor, etc.
- Manage a group of people who are towering experts but you are not.
- Manage the interface between consultants and the organization on a critical assignment.
- Help shut down a plant, regional office, product line, business, operation, etc.
- Prepare and present a proposal of some consequence to top management.
- Manage a cost-cutting project.
- Build a multifunctional project team to tackle a common business issue or problem.
- Work on a team looking at a reorganization plan where there will be more people than positions.
Section 5: Learning from Full-Time Jobs

These full-time jobs offer the opportunity to build your skill(s).

1. Crisis Manager

The core demands to qualify as Crisis Manager are: (1) Leader responsible for an unpredictable, unique crisis of significant proportion. (2) Success and failure will be evident and visible. (3) Takes Herculean effort to solve. (4) Learning something on the fly. (5) Solution requires cross-boundary team. (6) Leader will be a spokesperson and potentially subjected to media scrutiny. (7) Hostile questioning and suspicious atmosphere is common. (8) Time pressure is extreme. (9) Solution involves working with parties outside the organization. (10) Usually short-term (up to three months). (11) Other parts of job would have to be temporarily set aside. Examples of crisis management would be: (1) A product safety recall; product or system failure. (2) Unexpected death of a CEO or senior corporate executive. (3) Unexpected termination or scandal involving a CEO or senior corporate executive. (4) Trouble with a key customer or supplier that decreases revenue or production. (5) Natural disasters. (6) Terrorist attacks. (7) Kidnapping or arrest of employees; violent crime against employees.

2. Fix-Its/Turnarounds

The core demands to qualify as a Fix-it or Turnaround assignment are: (1) Clean-ing up a mess. (2) Serious people issues/problems like credibility/performance/morale. (3) Tight deadline. (4) Serious business performance failure. (5) Last chance to fix. Four types of Fix-its/Turnarounds: (1) Fixing a failed business/unit involving taking control, stopping losses, managing damage, planning the turnaround, dealing with people problems, installing new processes and systems, and rebuilding the spirit and performance of the unit. (2) Managing sizable disasters like mishandled labor negotiations and strikes, thefts, history of significant business losses, poor staff, failed leadership, hidden problems, fraud, public relations nightmares, etc. (3) Significant reorganization and restructuring (e.g., stabilizing the business, re-forming unit, introducing new systems, making people changes, resetting strategy and tactics). (4) Significant system/process breakdown (e.g., MIS, financial coordination processes, audits, standards, etc.) across units requiring working from a distant position to change something, providing advice and counsel, and installing or implementing a major process improvement or system change outside your own unit and/or with customers outside the organization.

3. Heavy Strategic Demands

The core demands necessary to qualify as a Heavy Strategic Demands assignment are: (1) Requires significant strategic thinking and planning most couldn’t do. (2) Charts new ground strategically. (3) Plan must be presented, challenged, adopted, and implemented. (4) Exposure to significant decision makers
and executives. Examples of jobs with Heavy Strategic Demands: (1) Strategic planning position. (2) Job involving repositioning of a product, service, or organization.

4. Scope Assignments

The core demands for a Scope (complexity) assignment are: (1) Significant increase in both internal and external scope or complexity. (2) Significant increase in visibility and/or bottom-line responsibility. (3) Unfamiliar area, business, technology, or territory. Examples of Scope assignments involving shifts: (1) Switching to new function/technology/business. (2) Moving to new organization. (3) Moving to overseas assignment. (4) Moving to new location. (5) Adding new products/services. (6) Moving between headquarters/field. (7) Switches in ownership/top management of the unit/organization. Examples of Scope assignments involving “firsts”: (1) First-time manager. (2) First-time managing managers. (3) First-time executive. (4) First-time overseas. (5) First-time headquarters/field. (6) First-time team leader. (7) First-time new technology/business/function. Scope assignments involving increased complexity: (1) Managing a significant expansion of an existing product or service. (2) Managing adding new products/services into an existing unit. (3) Managing a reorganized and more diverse unit. (4) Managing explosive growth. (5) Adding new technologies.

5. Start-Ups

The core demands to qualify as a start from scratch are: (1) Starting something new for you and/or for the organization. (2) Forging a new team. (3) Creating new systems/facilities/staffs/programs/procedures. (4) Contextual adversity (e.g., uncertainty, government regulation, unions, difficult environment). Seven types of start from scratches: (1) Planning, building, hiring, and managing (e.g., building a new facility, opening up a new location, moving a unit or company). (2) Heading something new (e.g., new product, new service, new line of business, new department/function, major new program). (3) Taking over a group/product/service/program that had existed for less than a year and was off to a fast start. (4) Establishing overseas operations. (5) Implementing major new designs for existing systems. (6) Moving a successful program from one unit to another. (7) Installing a new organization-wide process as a full-time job like Total Work Systems (e.g., TQM/ISO/Six Sigma).

Section 6: Learning from Your Plan

These additional remedies will help make this development plan more effective for you.

Learning to Learn Better

1. Teach Others Something You Don’t Know Well

Commit to a project like teaching something you don’t know much about to force you to learn quickly to accomplish the task; pick something new, different, or unfamiliar.
2. Plan Backwards from the Ideal
Envision what an ideal outcome would look like and plan backwards. What is the series of events that would have to take place to get there? What would people do? What would have to be done? How would people react? How would things play out? Could you plan it forward and get to the same outcome?

3. Study Yourself in Detail
Study your likes and dislikes because they can drive a lot of your thinking, judging, and acting. Ask which like or dislike has gotten in the way or prevented you from moving to a higher level of learning. Are your likes and dislikes really important to you or have you just gone on “autopilot”? Try to address and understand a blocking dislike and change it.

4. Commit to a Tight Time Frame to Accomplish Something
Set some specific goals and tighter-than-usual time frames for yourself, and go after them with all you’ve got. Push yourself to stick to the plan; get more done than usual by adhering to a tight plan.

5. Sort Through Information in Multiple Ways
Collect the data and arrange it in elements or pieces. Create definitions and arrange the data in various ways: chronologically, from most to least, from biggest to smallest, from cold to hot, what you know most about and least about, from known to unknown, etc., until the meaning becomes obvious.

6. Look for the Simplest Explanation, Find the Essence
Put all the complexity aside and ask yourself: What’s the most obvious thing this problem could be? What is the most obvious thing to do? Who is the most obvious person to talk to? What is the simplest explanation possible? What’s at the essence of the problem?

Learning from Experience, Feedback, and Other People

7. Getting Feedback from Bosses and Superiors
Many bosses are reluctant to give negative feedback. They lack the managerial courage to face people directly with criticism. You can help by soliciting feedback and setting the tone. Show them you can handle criticism and that you are willing to work on issues they see as important.

8. Getting Feedback from Direct Reports
Direct reports often fear reprisals for giving negative feedback about bosses, whether in a formal process, like a questionnaire, or informally and face-to-face. Even with a guarantee of confidentiality, some are still hesitant. If you want feedback from direct reports, you have to set a positive tone and never act out of revenge.
Learning from Courses

☐ 9. Supervisory Courses

Most new supervisors go through an “Introduction to Supervision” type course. They are designed to teach the common practices a first-line supervisor needs to know to be effective. The content of most of those courses is standard. There is general agreement on the principles of effective supervision. There are two common problems: (1) Do the students have a strong motivation to learn? Do they know what they don’t know? Is there any pain? Because motivated students with a need for the knowledge learn best, participants should have had some trying experiences and some supervisory pain and hardships before attending. (2) Are the instructors experienced supervisors? Have they practiced what they preach? Can they share powerful anecdotes to make key points? Can they answer questions credibly? If possible, select supervisory courses based on the instructors, since the content seems to be much the same for all such courses. Lastly, does the course offer the opportunity for practicing each skill? Does it contain simulations? Are there case studies you could easily identify with? Are there breakout groups? Is there opportunity for action learning? Search for the most interactive course.

☐ 10. Sending Others to Courses

If you are responsible for managing the development of others and, as part of that, sending them to courses, prepare them beforehand. Don’t send them as tourists. Meet with them before and after the course. Tell them why they need this course. Tell them what you expect them to learn. Give them feedback on why you think they need the course. Agree ahead of time how you will measure and monitor learning after they return. If possible, offer a variety of courses for your employees to choose from. Have them give you a report shortly after they return. If appropriate, have them present what they learned to the rest of your staff. After they return, provide opportunities for using the new skills with safe cover and low risk. Give them practice time before expecting full exercise of the new skills. Be supportive during early unsteadiness. Give continuous feedback on progress.

Decide what you want, decide what you are willing to exchange for it. Establish your priorities and go to work. H. L. Hunt – American oil tycoon
Suggested Readings


