

You Desire Success? Learn To Manage Daily To Your Top 3 Priorities

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Managing daily to your top three priorities is crucial to your professional success. However, my experience is that most people in our craft do not manage their to-do list effectively.

This article will show you how. Doing so can boost your effectiveness, reputation, and career.

Instantly Identify Your Top Three Priorities

If I were to put you on the spot and ask you what are your top three priorities or problems at work right now—by the way, priorities and problems mean the same thing to me in this context—and you could not rattle them off within three snaps of the fingers then you are not a consistently effective leader. You might be thinking how dare I judge you by so little information; that if I would give you a few minutes, then you could come up with your top three priorities. But if you need time to identify them then I restate my assertion that you are not a consistently effective leader. Instead, you are managing your day by the plethora of interruptions that come your way; by the noise and the minutia that fall over you. You are allowing your day to be managed by others instead of you taking charge and managing to the most important priorities. You are too soft if you are not seizing control of your domain of responsibility and primarily managing to your top three priorities each day.

To-Do List

Let's talk about how to do this. Most of you likely start your day with a to-do list of work items. That's good. You should. However, what I do—and perhaps some of you do as well—is create the list the night before. Why? Well, I already have had a busy full day, and I know where I want to hit the road running when I come into work the next day. Therefore, the night before is a great time to populate the list. But another reason I'll create the list the night before is to focus on the top three items on the list—the top three priorities. Let's say the list has ten items: the top three and a bottom seven. Now, most of you will likely have lists with more than ten items, but I want to make the math simple for illustrative purposes. When I go to sleep at the end of the day, my mind—my subconscious—is working on solving or moving towards the solving of one or more of these top three problems. When I wake the next day, these problems are either solved or well on their way to being solved; I have a better grasp of what I need to do moving forward. All of us have this ability to help resolve problems when we sleep. Regardless, if you, instead, choose to take 5-10 minutes of quiet time at the start of your work day to create your to-do list, that's fine.

Focus Predominately On Top Three Priorities

Now, let's say that you are traveling home at the end of your work day and you recognize that you have not made headway on any of your top three priorities, but you have managed to cross off all of your bottom seven: Do not feel good about your accomplishments that day! Why? Because you worked on the wrong things. If, instead, when you head for home, and you have not worked on any of your bottom seven but managed to make significant headway on just one of your top three, you should feel very good about your accomplishments for that day. And here's why: Your efficiency to work on your top three priorities defines your value—your contribution—to your organization, it defines your career; not the bottom seven.

30 Minutes Or More Available, Work On Top Three

You might be thinking: Neal, it sounds like you don't care if I work on my bottom seven. You're right. I don't care. In the big picture, they are insignificant. Look, if you have five minutes between meetings and you can eliminate one of your bottom seven, then go for it. But if you have 30 minutes or more between meetings, do not work on the bottom seven. 30 minutes is what I call significant time. You should be working on your top three priorities—they define your career.

Work Off Top Priorities Within 2-3 Days

Your top three priorities on the list should be worked off the list typically within 2-3 days. If occasionally you have a top-three item on the list for up to a week that's okay. What's that? You say that the items that make up your top three typically would take weeks or months to solve and you would not know how to remove them from your list in just 2-3 days. Okay. I'll show you how. Let's say one of your top three priorities will take you six

weeks to solve. Then put a six-week plan together. Identify the activities, their dependencies, their durations and who owns them. Then get agreement from all the people necessary to make the plan whole and fully committed and track the six-week plan like you do any other plan. Now replace that priority item from your to-do list with a new one.

What's that? You say the six-week plan hasn't completed and, therefore, the problem is still open? That you think the problem should remain on your list until it is solved? Look... You now have a good working plan to get it resolved. It's being taken care of. You will track its implementation with the frequency you feel it justifies. Remove the item from your top-three list and replace it with another very important item that now needs timely attention.

Occasionally, Not Working Top Three Is Okay

What if you come to work occasionally and find you are not able to work on any of your top three priorities because of that day's firefights and "please handles"? If this happens only occasionally, that's okay. You work in a complex, dynamic environment. However, if it happens routinely, it's not okay. If you cannot routinely work off your top three priorities, then you are the problem. If you are not working them off, no one else will—this is your domain of responsibility. You need help. You might be overloaded with work and need some relief; you might be poor at managing time, or it could be something else. Whatever. You need to seek and obtain the appropriate help.

Number One Reason Why Projects Fail

This is a good time to share with you what I believe may be a profound assertion. We have all seen lists touting the top 10 reasons why projects fail. The usual suspects include weak requirements, scope creep, lack of user involvement, unreliable estimates, incomplete staffing, poor communications, weak senior stakeholder support and others. However, from my experience, these lists miss the biggest reason—the number one reason—why projects fail: Because the project manager does not manage to his or her top three priorities on a daily basis. This is so important that I'm going to repeat it. The number one reason why projects fail is that the project manager does not manage to his or her top three priorities on a daily basis.

You might be wondering how come I'm so smart to get this while it appears that others haven't? Well, I'm not that smart, but I am an old guy who has been around a long time. Longevity and persistence helps me pick up things. For example, over the years I have performed reviews on hundreds of projects in trouble. When I do, I always conclude with identifying the top three problems—the top three priorities—that the project manager needs to address immediately. When I examine these top three lists, the ah-ha moment presents itself. The top items on the lists almost always should have been resolved not days earlier but weeks or months earlier—sometimes years depending on the duration of the project. The lists show that the project managers were not effectively focusing on their top three priorities on a daily basis; otherwise, these problems would have been resolved or under control. So, again, the number one reason why projects fail is that the

project manager does not manage to his or her top three priorities on a daily basis. This is a fundamental fact that knowing and adjusting your behavior to can significantly increase the success of your projects—and your career.

By the way, the article might have appeared to focus on Project Managers, not Business Analysts. Everything said here also applies to Business Analysts. The number one reason why Business Analysts fail is that the Business Analyst does not manage to his or her top three priorities on a daily basis.

Now, become your imagined self!

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