
MANAGING PRIORITIES

Effectively managing priorities requires a thorough understanding of your role, the objectives and goals of your department or institution, and the priorities and work of all key actors. Doing so will help prioritize your work and maintain focus; without this understanding, important facts can be easily overlooked. Managing priorities, along with all types of management, requires discipline, strategy, and focus. The purpose of this document is to provide the necessary tools and guidance to allow you to appreciate your tasks and prioritize effectively and focus on what matters most.

UNDERSTANDING THE STAKES

Effective priority-setting, the art of choosing which task to work on first, requires a great deal of understanding of the objectives, mission, and goals of yourself, your department or institution, and the priorities of your collaborators.

UNDERSTAND YOUR ROLE

Support staff are typically responsible for handling various important tasks with conflicting priorities, whether it is a one-time request, a standing deadline, or a leadership or sponsor's request. It is therefore important that they understand their role and mission within the institution and that they set aside sufficient time to process tasks in a timely and quality manner.

UNDERSTAND THE PRIORITIES, GOALS, AND MISSION OF YOUR DEPARTMENT AND INSTITUTION

Departments and institutions establish annual goals, covering strategic endeavors and high-level activities, intended to meet their financial, operational, and programmatic targets. These goals are broken down into smaller activities, distributed across departments, and become the highest priorities for the period. As a result, any direct request from leadership should be treated as a high priority.

UNDERSTAND THE PRIORITIES OF SENIOR PROGRAM STAFF OR INVESTIGATORS

Work plans and research strategies outline the program or scientific work that needs to be accomplished to meet contractual requirements. These are multi-layered, time-bound activities

with significant stakes that require everyone's contribution. They must rank among the most pressing responsibilities for all staff involved in supporting programmatic and scientific teams.

UNDERSTAND THE STAKEHOLDERS

Stakeholders such as sponsors, donors, auditors, and board members play a critical role in the life of the institution. Any request from these stakeholders must therefore be treated with the highest priority level.

PRIORITY MANAGEMENT

Establishing effective priority management requires a great deal of balancing deadlines, flexibility, and adaptability. The key is to be well organized, know your limits, and continuously assess incoming tasks, since priorities, particularly weekly and daily ones, are the most volatile and require frequent review.

ANNUAL PRIORITIES

This category includes the priorities, objectives, and goals established by the institution, assigned to each department, and once adopted, translated into actionable tasks to be achieved by year-end, with performance incentives attached. Their pace is dictated by the institution and/or your department. This category also includes your own performance goals agreed upon with your supervisor, which require dedicated time alongside your day-to-day deliverables.

MONTHLY PRIORITIES

Monthly priorities include a blend of departmental goals, standing deadlines, requests received, and personal goals you have scheduled on your calendar. They become the goals for the month.

WEEKLY PRIORITIES

These are the portions of your monthly goals assigned to a specific week, along with requests whose deadlines fall within that window. They typically belong in your Core Time, as they demand your highest level of energy. Your system must remain flexible enough to accommodate new requests, while ensuring sufficient time is reserved within the same or following week to complete them. Tasks rescheduled out of Core Time should be moved on to another available day or non-core time slot.

DAILY PRIORITIES

Daily priorities are drawn from your weekly schedule and newly received requests, and must be reassessed several times throughout the day, especially as new requests arrive. Give particular attention to late, short-turnaround requests, which are highly disruptive, and remain mindful of the effects they have on your workload and overall organization system.

BE NIMBLE AND FLEXIBLE

A consistent, well-maintained system is always better than none. The overall goal is to allow you to work in the most optimal environment: one that is flexible, adaptable, and communicative. The best systems are those easily reviewed and revised in response to shifting priorities and new events. When organized and clear on what is at stake, you can effectively respond to any new request. If you reach your limit or feel overwhelmed, reach out to your colleagues and supervisor for support. When managing a special assignment, request that routine tasks be temporarily redistributed to colleagues with available bandwidth.

UNDERSTAND THE COMPLEXITY AND TIMING OF DELIVERABLES

Beyond strategic activities, there are activities that are time-bound or demand considerable time and effort to complete. Due to the complexity and/or volume involved, these must be deliberately prioritized alongside routine work.

SUBMISSION DEADLINES

Support staff regularly manage deadline-driven submissions, whether proposals, reports, deliverables, or information requests. Regardless of the type, it is imperative these items are submitted on time, with sufficient care and attention devoted to ensuring a quality outcome.

STANDING DEADLINES

This category includes all contractual deliverables: annual reports, timesheets, journal entries, monthly reconciliations, and similar recurring obligations. These items must be entered in your calendar with reminders set up well in advance, and all related documents should be secured beforehand to allow uninterrupted processing in one sitting.

ONE-TIME REQUEST

This category includes any ad hoc requests received internally or externally, each carrying a specific deadline. Since some deadlines are arbitrary, self-imposed by the requestor, always confirm whether the deadline is firm and renegotiate when possible. In these cases, if circumstances prevent you from meeting an external deadline, respond promptly with a sound justification and propose a revised date that accounts for institutional policies, review requirements, and any required leadership approval.

LAST-MINUTE REQUEST

This category includes requests submitted with very short turnaround windows, often same-day or within one to two days, requiring immediate reprioritization. While disruptive, they may stem from genuine urgency or, more commonly, from the requestor's lack of planning. Address the task, remind the requestor of your processing timeline, and take steps, including escalating to leadership, if necessary, to prevent them from becoming a recurring pattern.

SUBMISSION WITH EXTERNAL COLLABORATORS

The more people and institutions involved, the lengthier and more complex the work becomes, making it essential to treat it as a top priority from the outset. Set collaborators' internal deadlines 10 to 15 days before your own, account for their internal review and approval processes, and maintain regular check-ins and reminders to keep all parties on track.

SUBMISSION WITH HIGH-VALUE AMOUNT OR INTEREST

Institutions periodically engage in exploratory activities, evaluating new lines of work or research, new sponsors, or new equipment, that require a dedicated team and close leadership oversight, making these high-priority endeavors. Similarly, high-value submissions such as federal contracts and NIH multi-component applications (P and U series) are complex by nature, demand extensive inter-institutional collaboration, and require significant energy and resources to prepare and submit. Both categories warrant top-priority treatment.

EASY WINS

Although not in the high-value category, some requests can be prioritized and completed first because they are straightforward and finishable in a single session, such as information requests, readily available documents, or a quick report which can be quickly run. Handling these easy wins

efficiently reduces backlog and builds momentum without displacing higher-priority work. The more you reduce your to-do list, the more motivated you will feel, building momentum that carries into your higher-priority work.

PROCESSING SYSTEM

It is essential to implement a processing system that is both firm and adaptable: one that provides structure while remaining responsive to the realities of a dynamic workload.

REQUESTS ASSESSMENT

One of the most common mistakes is treating all requests as equivalent. Although they may appear similar, requests often differ significantly in complexity; some may be more complex or involved than others. Always take time to read and assess each request upon receipt, confirm its scope, and seek clarification if anything is unclear. Then classify requests by priority and core or non-core status, add them to your calendar, and budget time for document gathering before beginning. Once work is underway, it should not be interrupted to retrieve missing inputs.

PROCESSING TIME

Assess your working capacity and establish a personal processing time, the number of business days required to handle a specific request, counted back from its submission deadline. This standard should differ from any institutional or departmental timeline. Once defined, communicate it to all team members and collaborators, explain its importance, and uphold it as consistently as possible.

REQUESTS TRIAGING

Every request, regardless of size, must be logged on your tracking list; never rely on memory or your inbox. Upon receipt, assess the difficulty and effort required. Easy wins can be handled quickly, while complex items must be broken down into steps and scheduled in your to-do list. For short-deadline items, confirm whether the deadline is fixed or flexible and renegotiate when possible. Remember: silence is not an option; if you say nothing, you are implicitly agreeing to the deadline.

ORDER OF PROCESSING

Requests should be processed in the order received, first in, first out (FIFO), as this system is fair and rewards those who plan ahead. True emergencies may justify processing the most recent request first (LIFO), but once resolved, remind the requestor of your processing time and uphold it consistently to prevent exceptions from becoming the norm.

QUEUE SYSTEM

A queue system tracks all active deliverables by logging requests chronologically and communicating their queue position to each requestor upon receipt. Consistent status updates on expected processing start times are essential to manage expectations and reduce unnecessary follow-up inquiries.

PRACTICAL GUIDE: 10 PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE PRIORITY MANAGEMENT

The following ten principles capture the most critical lessons from this guide. Each includes specific dos and don'ts for immediate application.

PRINCIPLE 1: KNOW YOUR CONTEXT BEFORE SETTING PRIORITIES

✓ Do:

- Connect every task to a departmental or institutional goal before acting on it.

✗ Don't:

- Assume the most recent or loudest request is the most important.

PRINCIPLE 2: DISTINGUISH URGENCY FROM IMPORTANCE

✓ Do:

- Protect dedicated time for important, non-urgent work: it is where your highest-value contribution lives.

✗ Don't:

- Let urgency alone determine what gets done first.

PRINCIPLE 3: ASSESS EVERY REQUEST BEFORE ACTING

✓ Do:

- Read, assess, and confirm the deadline's firmness before committing to any request.

X Don't:

- Begin work on a request before fully understanding its scope and requirements.

PRINCIPLE 4: BUILD AND MAINTAIN A RELIABLE TRACKING SYSTEM

✓ Do:

- Log every request, large or small, on a single master tracking list.

X Don't:

- Rely on memory or your inbox as a task management system.

PRINCIPLE 5: PROCESS WORK IN A FAIR AND CONSISTENT ORDER

✓ Do:

- Default to first-in, first-out (FIFO) and communicate queue positions proactively.

X Don't:

- Allow the most persistent requestor to routinely bypass the queue.

PRINCIPLE 6: UPHOLD YOUR PROCESSING TIME STANDARD

✓ Do:

- Define your processing time in business days and communicate it to all collaborators.

X Don't:

- Allow repeated exceptions to erode your standard without discussion.

PRINCIPLE 7: PLAN ACROSS ALL TIME HORIZONS

✓ Do:

- Connect daily actions to weekly goals, and weekly goals to monthly and annual priorities.

X Don't:

- Plan only day-to-day while losing sight of longer-horizon commitments.

PRINCIPLE 8: COMMUNICATE PROACTIVELY

✓ Do:

- Acknowledge every request promptly and provide a specific, realistic timeline.

✗ Don't:

- Wait until you are overwhelmed to inform your manager you are at capacity.

PRINCIPLE 9: BE WILLING TO RENEGOTIATE AND ESCALATE

✓ Do:

- Escalate priority conflicts to your supervisor with full context and a clear question.

✗ Don't:

- Stay silent about a conflict and hope it resolves itself.

PRINCIPLE 10: BUILD FLEXIBILITY INTO EVERY PLAN

✓ Do:

- Design your schedule to absorb a reasonable level of interruption without collapsing.

✗ Don't:

- Accept new high-priority tasks without explicitly removing or rescheduling something else.

CONCLUSION

Managing priorities is a daily practice, not a one-time exercise, that rewards consistency, self-awareness, and clear communication. The goal is not to do everything; it is to do the right things, in the right order, without losing sight of what matters most to your role, your team, and your institution.

This guide has covered the essential foundations: understanding your context and stakeholders, establishing priority frameworks across time horizons, categorizing the types of deliverables you manage, and building reliable processing systems. These are practical skills, applicable immediately, that sharpen with consistent use.

No system is perfect, and no day will go exactly as planned. What defines an effective professional is the ability to recover quickly when plans change, adapt when priorities shift, and keep critical work

moving forward regardless. When in doubt, communicate early, seek guidance, and support your colleagues as they navigate the same challenges.