

CHAPTER 4: PRIORITY MANAGEMENT

Knowing What Deserves Your Attention First

“Know what matters and you’ll know where you stand.”

This chapter builds on “Personal Time Management”, “Teamwork”, and “Managing Expectations.” Those chapters built the system for organizing your day, protecting your focus, and earning trust through reliable commitments. Priority management turns that working system into real professional impact. Knowing how to organize your day means little if you cannot tell what deserves your attention first.

The requests that matter most, whether from donors, leadership, or a looming deadline, carry consequences and opportunities: they build trust, open doors, and shape how far your reputation can take you. Getting this right is less about finishing deliverables and more about understanding them, staying curious enough to ask the right questions, and using that judgment to earn a seat closer to where decisions get made.

PART I: STRENGTHEN YOUR PROFESSIONAL FOUNDATION

1. UNDERSTAND THE STAKES

Understanding the stakes means knowing why a deliverable matters, who it affects, and what happens if it slips. It ties back to the institution's strategic vision and the annual goals that advance it, goals that trickle down into departmental and individual expectations. Contracts and grants are jeopardized when deadlines are missed and won when they are managed well. Broader compliance failures can carry serious consequences for the organization, which is exactly what makes these commitments high priority by nature. The clearer you are on what is at stake, the better you can protect quality and support what matters most.

BENEFIT

Avoids misalignment and keeps your effort pointed at the institution's most important commitments.

How?

- Map deliverables to your department's annual and strategic goals.
- Note the funder, sponsor, or authority behind each new deliverable.
- Ask what happens if it's late or incorrect, and set priority accordingly.
- Highlight contract, grant, and high-authority deliverables for thorough review and priority assignment.

2. ACKNOWLEDGE PRIORITY LEVELS

While all requests are important to their individual requesters, it is crucial to acknowledge that some priorities outrank others; they exist at different altitudes. As discussed earlier in this series, you should have a true understanding of your company's broader goals and initiatives and how those impact your department, your supervisor, and you. This understanding will guide you in deciding which tasks to tackle first. Requests from your most senior leadership or from your most influential partners are going to rank higher in priority than requests from a new collaborator looking to gather some information or a supervisor looking to check in on an on-going assignment. Requests that have the potential to impact the highest level of your organization will naturally rise to the top of your tracker; this does not mean other requests fall off. Strong professionals have the systems in place to balance their schedule and to appropriately allocate their time and resources in an efficient and intentional way. What is most important gets done first, and everything else is scheduled around that.

BENEFIT

Keeps you focused on the bigger picture while also giving you the flexibility to shift focus between different tasks.

How?

- Block annual, monthly, and weekly deliverables directly into your calendar.
- Set reminders scaled to each deliverable's complexity or importance.
- Reassess daily priorities each morning or as new requests arrive.
- Revisit monthly and annual goals during a recurring check-in.

3. BE NIMBLE AND FLEXIBLE

Being nimble means holding your plan loosely enough to adjust without losing structure. Priorities shift, requests appear, and things go wrong. Intentional flexibility is about staying thoughtful throughout change while keeping sight of what matters most and using your system consistently and transparently, with room left for last-minute requests. The best systems are the ones that bend easily when priorities shift because they have been designed to do so.

Most of the time, you can work through your queue in the order requests arrive; however, arrival order isn't the same as priority. A deliverable that carries more weight, because of its importance, complexity, or difficulty, may need to jump ahead of something that came in earlier. This is where your tracker helps you reorganize without losing track of requests. Remind the requester of your submission process and deadline expectations so last-minute requests don't become the norm, and flag it to your supervisor if the pattern becomes chronic with a particular person.

BENEFIT

Protects quality and team dynamics and prevents overwhelm when plans change.

How?

- Review your inbox, queue, tracker, and calendar on a recurring basis during your Non-Core time blocks.

- Update your tracker right away when a new deliverable disrupts your plan.
- Use the system you already have in place to plan for and adjust to new, high-priority requests.
- Flag capacity limits to your supervisor early, rather than absorbing the overflow.
- Reassign or postpone routine deliverables during special assignments.

PART II: MANAGE COMPLEXITY AND HIGH-VALUE DELIVERABLES

1. MANAGE SUBMISSION DEADLINES

Deadlines don't all carry the same risk, but missing any of them costs you something. A standing deadline missed puts compliance in jeopardy. A one-time deadline missed strains the relationship behind it. A last-minute deadline missed costs you credibility in the moment it matters most. The way through all three is the same: see them coming and act early or speak up when you see the conflict. Use your calendar to schedule deadlines as far in advance as possible, and break large deliverables into checkpoints so nothing gets missed. When something genuinely does land at the last minute, the move isn't to panic, it's to work it fast and get it right, then close the loop with the requester afterward. That conversation keeps "last minute" the exception instead of the expectation.

BENEFIT

Reduces preventable urgency and strengthens trust with internal and external partners.

How?

- Add standing deadlines to your calendar and gather documents early.
- Confirm and renegotiate one-time deadlines when they aren't realistic.
- Respond quickly to last-minute requests with a clear, revised timeline.

2. MANAGE EXTERNAL COLLABORATOR SUBMISSIONS

Work involving multiple institutions gets harder the more people you add, since each partner runs on their own timeline and review process. Communication across institutions can also come with its own obstacles, and this is where your communication skills (discussed in more detail in the next chapter) will benefit you. Treat any partnership or external collaboration as a priority from day one; your due diligence here will not only protect the deliverable, but it will also protect the relationship.

BENEFIT

Prevents last-minute crises and protects submission quality.

How?

- Set internal deadlines ahead of external ones to build in buffer time.

- Map each partner's review and approval steps before work begins.
- Focus on communication and make every effort to be clear and avoid ambiguity.
- Give each partner the full list of what's needed at the outset and stagger the due dates so the pieces you need soonest come in first.
- Hold recurring check-ins and send reminders as each step approaches.

3. PRIORITIZE HIGH-VALUE DELIVERABLES

High-value deliverables, whether the value is financial, strategic, or institutional, carry consequences significant enough to demand early attention, protected time, and close coordination. Treat them as a priority the moment they're identified and start work sooner rather than later; these are tasks that can't be messed up. When dealing with HVDs, you may need to alter your routine to ensure you are giving them your full attention. Loop in supervisors and colleagues so that they understand the shift in your process.

BENEFIT

Reduces risk and strengthens institutional credibility.

How?

- Tag high-value deliverables in your tracker as soon as they're identified.
- Be thoughtful in your due diligence and your early communication with the requester to ensure full understanding of the request.
- Block dedicated time to protect quality on these deliverables specifically.
- Loop in collaborators early and update leadership at set checkpoints.

4. USE EASY WINS STRATEGICALLY

Easy wins are the small deliverables that take minutes, not hours, and clearing them quickly is a strategy in itself. As covered in Personal Time Management, Fridays are a natural time to batch and clear tasks, so the deliverables that really need your focus get it throughout the week when your energy is highest.

BENEFIT

Reduces clutter and maintains momentum for complex work.

How?

- Batch small deliverables into a single group.
- Group similar deliverables into one time block for efficiency.
- Set aside a recurring block of time to close them out in one sitting.
- Mark each complete before shifting focus to harder work.

PART III: DUE DILIGENCE

Priority setting happens early, and due diligence makes that possible. The concept itself, triaging and studying a request before committing to it, is introduced in full in Personal Time Management. What follows here is a summary of that same process, applied specifically to the moment you are deciding where something belongs in your priorities.

For every request, perform your due diligence shortly after receipt; it is during this process that you assess and assign its priority level. This matters most for complex, collaborative, or high-value work where time is of the essence. Skipping this step rarely saves time. What looks like a shortcut now tends to resurface later as unclear scope, information you're forced to chase mid-task, or a deadline that was never realistic to begin with. The time spent up front allows for an informed priority decision rather than a reactive one, and it protects the rest of your queue from absorbing the fallout.

BENEFIT

Strong systems reduce preventable urgency and make priority decisions easier and more defensible.

PART IV: WHY THIS MATTERS

Everything in this guide converges on a single moment: deciding what to work on next. Who is asking matters: a federal partner, a donor, or leadership carries different weight than a peer. What is being asked matters just as much: a contractual obligation is not interchangeable with a routine update, even when they land the same day. Finally, timing matters: annual, monthly, and weekly deliverables carry different pressures, and whether a submission is early, on time, or late changes the calculation.

This is where the tools already built in this guide pay off. Standing deadlines calendared with reminders scaled to complexity mean you are notified before the pressure sets in, so complex or highly collaborative deliverables can start early, leaving room for drafts, feedback, and approval. Manage what you control well, but when something last-minute or late would compromise what is already committed, sound the alarm immediately so it can be reassigned, rather than absorbing it and spreading the risk across everything else in your queue.

Being a professional means managing every deliverable in front of you and delegating, honestly and early, what you cannot. Handled this way, the work never comes to a stop because of you, and you remain part of the solution instead of becoming part of the problem. When time and priority management work together, you move through your list more efficiently, freeing up time for the strategic work that builds a career.

UP NEXT

Now that you can decisively and confidently prioritize and manage your tasks, we'll focus on how to communicate those decisions to the people around you.