Ruthless prioritization while dogs pee on the floor

Mandate · 10x / 0.1x · Fallout

"Remember that thing we thought was a thing?
It's not a thing. But here's the thing, that *other* thing?
Totally a thing!"

> " *All we have to decide is what to do
> with the time that is given us.*"
> —*Gandalf the Wizard*

THE PRIORITIZATION MANDATE

Time is a zero-sum resource: When you spend an hour on a thing, you are necessarily *not* spending an hour on the entire universe of alternative things. Every minute is a choice. Every choice is a trade-off.

We cannot create more time; it is a hard constraint. We can maximize *productive* time through better habits: good sleep, sensible diet, reasonable exercise, restorative rest, reading books instead of doom-scrolling Twitter. But even here we're prioritizing within 24 hours per day, choosing how we live and rest to maximize our effectiveness at work. There isn't enough time for more than two big things[2] in your life.

We need more time. Not 30% more, but 3000% more.

Every company quantifies that claim with a repository of data: The issue tracker. Over the years you accumulate thousands of valid items: Little ideas that would be nice to do; big features that would create differentation;[3] bugs that customers actually experience; design tweaks[4] that make the team proud of their craft. You will never complete all these; completing even 10% would be a miracle, the ratio worsening by the week as more items are added than removed. The better you listen to customers, the more creative your teams, the worse the ratio becomes. You hire more people to get more done, but new talent have new ideas, and the ratio worsens again. Beautiful, and maddening.

So, time is a fixed constraint that limits us to 10% or even 1% of what we wish we could execute. Ironically the fraction diminishes with scale.

The inescapable conclusion is the trite statement that "We must prioritize"—intelligently determining which precious few things we will actually do.

In fact we can't help but prioritize, even if mindlessly. Since we can only do one thing at a time, whatever we're doing now is definitionally our "highest priority." Reading this sentence is currently your highest priority. While "prioritizing" doom-scrolling is obviously faulty decision-making, there's the more insidious case of prioritizing things due to necessity but not importance (e.g. paying taxes on time). Indeed, a common complaint of prioritization is that we're constantly doing things that happen to have deadlines, instead of things that matter. "Urgent, but not important" tends to win over "Important, but not urgent," if we're not paying attention.

Prioritization is a choice, and more often than we'd like to admit, the choice was mindless. We've all lost a few hours to doom-scrolling or YouTube or TV (if you were born before 1990). Mindless or not, it was still a choice. Maybe that activity was useful for "restorative rest." Maybe it was just a poor choice. Maybe we should give ourselves grace. Maybe.

Prior art

There are, of course, myriad prioritization frameworks. On this site alone I've detailed many of my own:

- Fermi ROI:[5] Replacing rubrics, especially for "ROI"-style evaluations
- Binstack:[6] Making significant choices with incomparable dimensions
- Investment Criteria:[7] When to invest significant time and money
- Adjacency Matrix:[8] How to expand an existing product
- Rocks, Pebbles, Sand:[9] Analyzing and prioritizing three *sizes* of work
- Satisficing vs Maximizing:[10] Prioritizing some things[11] as "good enough," others as "never good enough."

- Fairytale Quarterly Planning:[12] Prioritizing work against strategic objectives as well as the obstacles that are preventing us from winning
- JIT streams:[13] Handling multiple, incomparable inputs, separating prioritization from work-planning

I don't like anything with a rubric or a computed score (this is why[5]). I don't like anything with a "confidence level" (because you're incapable of scoring it properly, and can't discuss it accurately[14]). I don't like anything that is built to produce symmetry[15] for consultants' slides rather than reflecting the messiness of the real world. I don't like anything that purports to compare incomparable things (e.g. scoring "more growth" with the same made-up number as we score "don't run out of money" or "make employees happy").

Beyond the built-for-purpose frameworks above, there's a simple overarching framework that applies to every type of prioritization, foisted upon us through the observation that we have time for less than 10% of what we'd like to accomplish.

Here is that framework.

10X / 0.1X PRIORITIZATION

10x tasks

Despite how precious time is, some tasks are so valuable, so impactful, that the return on your investment is an order of magnitude more than what you put in, even if you valued your time at (say) $1000/hour.[16]

You must seek out these "10x things"[17] that can transform the company. Examples:

- The few features that win the majority of sales, whether through pure delight[18] or because of a combination of utility and uniqueness among the competition.
- Finding the perfect marketing positioning[19] and wording[20] where advertisements convert 2x higher and people landing on the home page buy 2x more often.
- Finding the pricing model[21] that maximizes profitable growth while maintaining fairness for customers.
- Taking the time to correctly identify the next strategic objective or biggest obstacle,[12] so everyone can prioritize their own time towards this most-important thing.
- Hiring the next critical employee who dramatically increases the company's throughput and work-quality and decision-making-quality, while adding a skillset that was previously missing, a skillset needed to overcome the current obstacle or the next strategic objective.
- Addressing the single biggest drag on growth.[22]
- Deciding how to expand the business into the next adjacency.[8]

If you don't know what one or two 10x tasks you should be working on, then *identifying that is your highest priority*. Otherwise are certainly not prioritizing properly; the entire company is misusing their time. This is my method[12] for determining what those things are.

If you have too many 10x choices, the Binstack prioritization framework[6] is designed for this type of "maximizing value" decision, when the inputs are incomparable.

It's rare, however, to have too many 10x possibilities. If you think you do, it's likely that you are being too generous in declaring things "10x". They really need to literally "10x" a key metric, or be the difference between life or death. Their upside must be so massive, that even when it inevitably takes twice as long to implement and is half as impactful as you estimated, it was still well worth it. To take the hit of that 4x reduction and still have a great outcome requires starting at 10x.

To further refine your thinking, consider that these are investments—i.e. applying significant time, expecting an outsized return, but with uncertainty. Here is a guide for making good investments.[7]

0.1x tasks

Most activities are worth less than $1000/hour, even if they are mandatory. These are the "0.1x tasks." You should minimize these through several strategies:

- Eliminate them completely by structuring your life, product, target-customer-selection,[23] or company strategy[24] to avoid them. Here is a guide[25] for inventing ways to avoid them.
- Delegate,[26] even if the result is worse than what you'd do yourself (e.g. grocery delivery being both more expensive, and not picking the same apples you would have picked). It's not worth the time to do everything (your definition of) "perfect." You need to be in command instead of in control.[27]
- Batch or automate,[28] accepting minor penalties (e.g. paying bills only once per month and risking occasional late fees, or batching security patches, since you can't ignore them forever but each one is unlikely to be exploited in the next few weeks).
- Archive loose tickets that are older than 100 days. Because of the rule that more than 90% of our ideas will never be done, realize that these are already among that 90%; deleting them will help you prioritize the remainder. If something is truly important, it will come up again in future. (Hence "archive", not "delete".)

It's tempting to assume that small, easy tasks are automatically 0.1x tasks, but that is a fallacy of conflating "impact" with "effort." Easy things can have a large impact (making them 10x almost definitionally), and complex things can have no impact on revenue or employee happiness.

Sometimes many small tasks add up to a 10x impact; I call this "life by a thousand sparks".* A common example is "great design". While amazing design is not required for success,[4] there are many examples of products winning primarily because of beloved design. Great design is not "one thing," however. There are macro-scale architectural decisions, but also it emerges from thousand details: subtle color choices, pixel-perfect layout, font and word selection, aspect ratios, play of whitespace, satisfyingly snappy interactivity, a design system for comprehensive consistency, fixing every last bug that is aesthetic rather than functional, and harmony between the website, the product, the emails, and the material for marketing, sales, and support. These myriad tasks should not be dismissed as individually 0.1x, if they are specifically in service to a 10x concept that is also the primary way you win customers in a competitive market.

"I *am* multi-tasking! I've done this report three or four times already!"

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* A facetious opposite of "death by a thousand cuts".

What if there were no 1x tasks?

The world isn't binary, but I encourage you to think of it as binary to force yourself to make clearer decisions. Idea-abundance is beautiful, but we must be ruthless, final, and precious with our time.

You will inevitably label things as "10x" which are really 1x. You will spend too much time on 0.1x things; after all, there are so many. Forcing this binary choice is reductive, but helps us be ruthless.

Of course in reality there is a spectrum of ideas, sizes, impacts, risks, and confidence. Our ability to measure any of that even *post facto*[30] is laughably poor, and our ability to predict any of them is even more pitiful. If you insist on the existence of 1x tasks,* use the Rocks, Pebbles, Sand Framework[9] which explains how to segment by size, how to prioritize each size differently, and how to resolve the common conflicts that arise as you schedule work in practice.

DEALING WITH THE FALLOUT: DOGS PEEING ON THE FLOOR

In a well-lit living room, a man is reading a book in an chair while a dog is pees on the floor. The man doesn't react. You're watching from a window, concluding that this man must be ignorant, crazy, or at least a poor decision-maker. Put down the book and take that dog for a walk, idiot!

Except, you don't know the full story.

In one hour, the man has the most important meeting of his life. His performance in this meeting will dictate the next ten years of his career. Everything he needs to know to be successful in this meeting is in that

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* Another exponent of 10x / 1x / 0.1x is the great Product Management[31] teacher Shreyas Doshi[32] with his excellent LNO framework.[33]

book. Yes the dog should have been taken for a walk, but the penalty of having to clean up that pee is worth it, because the call is *that* important.

The decision is rational. Yet the observer sees only irrationality. This is caused by two things:

- The observer doesn't know the complete story.
- The observer has trouble accepting that something bad/stupid can nevertheless be the right decision, because the alternative is even worse.

This inevitably happens at your company when you ruthlessly prioritize. Because you're so focused on the most important thing, there are other things that lay fallow. Fires burning that you're intentionally ignoring because although they *are* fires, they still aren't as important as the Most Important Thing. Dogs peeing on the floor. On purpose.

But others see the fires burning, the dogs peeing, for months, for years, and then lose faith in leadership. They complain—which is understandable, and accurate—and lose morale. Worse, they start believing that The Deciders must be crazy, just as the window-peeker believed. Loss of trust and respect leads to talent leaving, which leads to the death of an organization.

"They never listen to my ideas," the most prolific idea-creators complain. They're right, too; after all, mathematically you could never implement more than a few percent of thos ideas. Not because you're not "listening," but because of simple math. You have to focus on the peeing dogs.

The way you combat this natural progression is to address the two bullets above. You have to transmit the complete story, not just of the few priorities, but why they are the top ones. You have to acknowledge

the twenty things other that also deserve attention, explaining why we're intentionally letting those fires burn, those dogs pee, because the top priorities are even more important.

And you can retell the story of the dog peeing on the floor, acknowledging that it feels bad watching the dogs pee, especially when you know how to prevent it. I don't remember the origin of this particular parable, but I've retold it many times at WP Engine, and it sticks. It works.

This is what prioritization actually looks like. The full picture, not just the social media admonitions that you "have to focus!".

The full story feels bad, and requires constant, repetitive communication. Because it *is* bad to see the pee; we can rationalize it only when we see that the pee buys us time to do the most important things—the things that leverage our precious, woefully limited time, for outsized results.

Good luck. No one said it would be easy.

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