

SIX QUESTIONS TO ENSURE YOU ARE SOLVING THE RIGHT PROBLEM

You and a friend are having a picnic by the side of a river. Suddenly you hear a shout from the direction of the water—a child is drowning. Without thinking, you both dive in, grab the child, and swim to shore. Before you can recover, you hear another child cry for help. You and your friend jump back in the river to rescue her as well. Then another struggling child drifts into sight... and another... and another. The two of you can barely keep up. Suddenly, you see your friend wading out of the water, seeming to leave you alone. “Where are you going?” you demand. Your friend answers, “I’m going upstream to tackle the guy who’s throwing all these kids in the water.”

- A public health parable (adapted from the original, which is commonly attributed to Irving Zola. Reprinted in *Upstream* by Dan Heath.)

I read this parable recently, and it made me reflect on leadership in today’s environment. There is no doubt that we are entering a tough time. Inflation is shooting up, interest rates are being raised, and a recession is perceived to be on the horizon. At the same time, employees are in the middle of the “Great Resignation” and fighting to keep some of the work conditions that they experienced during the worst COVID times. Problems seem to be popping up left, right, and center, and leaders are spending more and more time firefighting.

Unfortunately, the sheer number of issues causes leaders to enter into a short-term reactive mindset. They end up focusing on the short-term needs and lose sight of the long-term strategic imperatives. And truth be told, I fully understand why. Who wants to talk about remodeling the kitchen when the roof is leaking and the garage is on fire? But getting caught up in the constant leadership firefighting causes us to lose sight of one critical thing. Not all fires need to be put out.

Are You Fighting Too Many Fires?

Before we deep dive into how to focus on the right problems, we should spend some time on how to stay focused. More specifically, we should review some of the most common things that distract leaders from truly important things. Here are a few things that might seem important, but will ultimately end up stretching you too thin.

1. Your Inbox & Instant Messengers - The invention of email and instant messaging helped usher in a completely new era of productivity, but both are sinkholes for wasting time. Throughout the day, we are constantly being pinged with the next “critical” item we need to address. And for many people, ending the day having answered all their emails / messages is a great day. But not all things are equally important. Constantly dealing with the never-ending flow of messages can easily prevent you from working on actually important work.

2. Trying to Please Everyone - The famous saying goes, “*You can please some of the people all of the time, you can please all of the people some of the time, but you can’t please all of the people all of the time.*” Trying to keep everyone happy seems like a noble goal for a leader. I know I want my boss to think about keeping me happy. But sometimes critical decisions will piss some people off, and it is the job of the leader to do what is important, even if it is unpopular.

3. Easy vs Hard - Accomplishing easy tasks is very motivating. It feels great at the end of the day with a long checklist of accomplishments. But this bias towards easy tasks means harder tasks get delayed or ignored. Instead of reviewing the tasks as either Easy or Hard, leaders should assess their tasks as Impactful vs Inconsequential. That way they know that no matter the ease or difficulty, they shouldn’t be spending their time on inconsequential tasks.

Six Questions to Ensure You are Addressing the “Right” Problem

Not everything is equally important, and that can be difficult for many employees and leaders to accept. They understand it conceptually, but when it comes to how they spend their day, they focus on answering every email, attending every meeting, and checking off every task. Getting things done doesn’t mean you

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are getting the right things done. Hidden amongst all the emails, meetings, and tasks, are a few actual burning issues that you or your team need to address.

Great leaders ignore most of the haystack and, instead, focus on finding those needles. They assess every task or issue that comes across their desk and prioritize only the critical few. While many leaders have their own way to assess what is critical, we recommend you use the following 6 questions to help you and your team prioritize your tasks.

1) If this issue were left unaddressed, how could it affect the finances of our organization over the next week, month, six months, or year? - If the issue has significant financial impact, then probably you should be focusing on it. That doesn't mean losing money is the end all be all of prioritization, but it is a great red flag to look for.

2) How directly and significantly is this issue going to impact our key stakeholders (i.e., customers, employees, investors, business partners, etc.)? - Negatively impacting your stakeholders might not have short term financial impacts, but they often have long term and potentially unforeseen financial consequences. For example, low engagement in your organization might not seem a huge problem now, but that can quickly lead to poorer customer interactions and higher resignations of talent.

3) What is the likely impact of this issue on the reputation of our organization? - This question is a logical continuation of the stakeholder impact question. Everyone can make a small mistake, but some issues can significantly impact your organization's reputation. It won't matter if you eventually fix the problem. The damage to your reputation will be done, and it will be difficult to regain that level of trust.

4) How likely will this issue become more serious or widespread in upcoming months/year? - This question is tough to assess, as research shows humans struggle to predict future consequences. That being said, we recommend being a little conservative in predicting risks. Not every snowball will cascade into an avalanche, but it is better to stop too many snowballs instead of missing one avalanche.

5) Is addressing this issue likely to help us uncover and begin to deal with underlying problems in our organization? - This question continues to explore the risk that the problem is larger than you realize, but this question focuses on the underlying root causes. Sometimes the root issue is plain as day, but in other situations the issue is actually a symptom of a much larger issue. I always like to reimagine this question as, "Is this issue a sickness that we need to treat, or a symptom of a much more dangerous illness?"

6) How confident are we that we understand the nature and the scope of the issue? - Finally, you should question your ability to answer the above questions accurately. Maybe you need more information before any decisions are made, or maybe you should discuss the issue with other teams in your organization. Leaders get into trouble when they assume, they have all the information. So, take a moment to critically assess whether or not you understand the issue.

Solving the Critical Problems Requires Everyone is Aligned on What is "Critical"

Being distracted by non-critical tasks is incredibly easy, especially because your colleagues are not trying to purposefully distract you. 99% of the time there is positive motivation behind their actions. They genuinely want your input at a meeting, or your insight into a problem. But just because someone wants you to do something, doesn't mean it is important that you do it. And that's where we come to our final point; everyone has to be aligned on what is critical to the organization.

Solving the right problems in your organization is not something you can do alone. Prioritization is something that should always be done with your team, and not individually. In fact, these six questions should be used to determine priorities from the top to the bottom of the organization. Once your team and the rest of organization is aligned around which fires are important to put out, then you can more easily ignore the other things that aren't as important.



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