

# Leaders, Are You Setting Personal Strategic Priorities?

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Organizations of all sizes acknowledge the importance of setting strategic priorities to focus their time, energy, money, and human capital, and to establish goals and metrics that help measure success in meeting those priorities. You should follow suit.

By formalizing your personal strategic priorities as a nonprofit leader, you determine where you can do the most for your organization and team, and identify where to place your attention, time, and energy in support of the organization and your role.

Personal strategic priorities are distinct from an organization's priorities but are often still in support of achieving its goals. Let's say a technology start-up has a company goal of launching a new product. The board of directors has charged the CEO with increasing her public presence to build awareness and interest in the product. In this case, the CEO's personal priorities support the product launch by, say, ramping up external communications and setting measurable goals in the number of speeches, articles, and social media posts she uses to promote it. This set of priorities supports the organization and potentially other goals the leader might have in the area of public speaking.

In addition to setting the right priorities, it's crucial to determine ways to assess progress and change course as necessary. The below steps can help leaders set priorities that are achievable and measurable.

## Related Tools

This PowerPoint template can help you develop and track your own priorities. It includes a:

- Process outline
- Priorities dashboard
- Progress assessment

## 1. Setting your personal strategic priorities

Create a list of potential priorities by answering the following questions:

- **Your organizational priorities and goals:** What does your organization need to achieve this year? What might your role be in realizing them? Your role in realizing them will likely be reflected in your personal priorities.
- **Your unique value-add:** What can you do that no one else can do? For a CEO or founder, this can mean meeting with key stakeholders or building an external presence.
- **Your current team capacity and engagement:** Are there gaps you need to account for? How healthy is your organizational culture and staff engagement?
- **Your most recent performance review:** What have others identified as areas for growth for you as a leader? How will you actively address these moving forward?

This exercise may produce a list a mile long. It is important to pare it down to a manageable list of 3-5 priorities to which you can commit. Determine which items are both time-sensitive and important to your success, and prioritize the areas in which you feel you will have the biggest impact.

Review your list with others. Your team and board members may be able to offer useful input based on their roles and perspectives from working with you. This offers valuable insight into your professional strengths and weaknesses, and can shape your perspective on prioritization. Seek out many voices to get a balanced viewpoint, and consider the collective input you receive in your decision on where to focus your time and energy.

Determine metrics. Once you have determined your priorities, it's time to define the metrics that will measure your effectiveness. What are the results you want, and how will you reach them? How can you break down each priority into smaller steps and what is your timeline for each? How often will you review these metrics? Are there [applications or other tools that can help keep you on track?](#)

The metrics should be as specific as possible. For example, for a nonprofit executive director struggling with staff engagement and retention, one could set metrics in both outputs (actions) and outcomes (results).

Output goals	Outcome goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Talent management plan established addressing each staff member</li><li>• Pulse check conducted with managers monthly on team engagement &amp; retention risk</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increase staff engagement survey scores from 3.5 to 4.2 by end of year</li><li>• Reduce unexpected &amp; regrettable staff departures to no more than 2 per year (5% of staff)</li></ul>

These are things the ED is personally leading and holding himself accountable for in relation to this priority. Other members of the team may be doing other things such as analyzing staff engagement data to identify trends, challenges to address, culture champions, and specific initiatives they could lead. All of these will likely influence the outcome goals, as well.

## 2. Working towards your priorities

**Examine your current reality and adjust course.** Think about how you already spend your time and resources. How does it align with the priorities you just set? If a bulk of time is spent on things outside these priority areas—perhaps on other organizational priorities, external requests, or day-to-day administrative tasks—you want to make some shifts. Can you delegate tasks to teammates or hire support staff to take things off your plate?

**Continually align your time with your priorities.** It can be helpful to review your schedule and to-do list on Friday afternoons for the following week. What key meetings will occur? What tasks do you hope to accomplish? Think about how your time and activities map to your priorities. Ask your assistant, chief of staff, or someone else on your team to help hold you accountable to maintaining focus on your priorities.

## 3. Assessing performance against your priorities

**Review your performance.** Take time to review your priorities on a monthly or quarterly basis. Look at your performance against the metrics you've laid out to see where you're succeeding and falling short. If you're not hitting the mark with some of them, reflect on what is holding you back and how you can address it.

**Share with others.** You may want to share reflections on progress against your priorities with your team and board members, either during a regularly scheduled team or board meeting, or at a planning retreat. This will help you stay accountable and help these groups support you in achieving your goals.

**Revisit and make changes.** Your personal strategic priorities are a living document, and as such, they will change from time to time. Avoid tossing out a strategic priority because it seems too hard or simply for the sake of change. But also know that as your organization changes, your personal strategic priorities might need to change as well. If you accomplish a priority and can strike it from your list, be sure to set another one to take its place.

An easy way to assess your progress and review with others is creating a stoplight dashboard. List each priority and the associated goals and metrics. Then grade yourself on your performance; green (strong progress to goals), yellow (moderate), or red (poor.) An interesting exercise might be to give your team a blank scorecard to give their reflections of your performance on each. Reflect on what is leading to those results and what can be done to change them. If green dominates the chart with only one red showing up, you know where to focus your energy going forward. If the chart is mostly yellow, that may indicate you are spread too thin and should further narrow your priorities.

Following this process will allow you to focus your work where you can have the most impact for your organization. Like any other planning process, however, its effectiveness is reliant upon strong implementation. If you regularly revisit your priorities and ensure your time is aligned with them, you'll feel more on top of your tasks and increase your effectiveness as a leader.

### Applications that Can Help You Prioritize Your Time

Here are some phone and web applications that can help you work towards your goals and prioritize your actions in line with them:

- **Goals on Track:** This web application includes SMART goal templates, action plans, and tools to track time spent and progress to goals.
- **Wunderlist:** This popular task management application can track your to-dos across multiple devices. You can also partner with collaborators to assign tasks.
- **Todoist:** This task management application syncs with Evernote. The Karma feature "gamifies" productivity.
- **Asana:** This project management application allows you to create projects, tasks and sub-tasks, and assign them to collaborators on your team.

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