

Do What Matters Most

What's in it for me? Learn how to prioritize tasks and make the most of each day.

Do you ever work late into the night chasing deadlines? Are you behind on your to-do list? Do you feel like there is too much to do and not enough time to tackle it all? Well, if you do, you're not alone. In fact, there's something most executives struggle to manage – and that's their own time. Little surprise that many end up overlooking what matters most. Luckily, there's something that can help you get the most of each day, both at work and at home. And that secret sauce is – prioritizing. In these blinks, you'll learn a simple process to help you identify your priorities and stay focused on them. In these blinks, you'll learn

how to establish a low-stress approach to life's highest priorities; why you should develop a personal vision for each role in life; and how to achieve annual goals using a weekly planning tool.

Manage your time more effectively by prioritizing what matters most.

Here's a story from one of the authors, a former US air force pilot. He was on a routine training mission, and everything seemed just fine. He banked the plane into a 180-degree turn, and then an alert from one of the systems in the cockpit caught his attention. As he looked down to work the various switches and buttons, another jet unexpectedly crossed his flight path. Both planes were tearing through the sky at 1000 mph. They nearly collided, missing one another by less than 100 feet. Later, during the debrief, both pilots gave the same reason for why they didn't notice the other jet: they were overwhelmed by activity inside their own cockpits. This is an example of what's known as task saturation. It happens when a pilot has so much going on that he struggles to process everything the environment throws at him. This can lead to dangerous oversight, and it's a problem in the airspace as well as in the workplace. The key message here is: Manage your time more effectively by prioritizing what matters most. You're probably not a fighter pilot, but there's a good chance that you, too, have experienced task saturation in daily life. Remember: task saturation happens when there's a lot going on and too little time to address it all. Sixty-eight percent of managers surveyed by the authors said their number one challenge was focusing on what matters most. Eighty percent didn't have a clear process for how to prioritize their time. The authors' answer was to create a simple process for managing time more effectively. It is loosely based on how the airforce works. Pilots are trained to focus on the most critical signals, known as primary instruments. They may show, for instance, airspeed or altitude. In the jet, you need to prioritize them if you want to stay alive. In your workspace you, too, can overcome task saturation by learning to prioritize. The “do what matters most” method consists of developing three habits: writing down a personal vision, setting annual goals for both your professional and personal lives, and planning the next week in advance. But, just like the author needed a debrief to assess his flight, you, too, need to step back before you start prioritizing – as you'll hear in the next blink.

Start by assessing yourself and your current approach to your priorities.

Amy, an executive at American Express, was promoted year after year, and eventually became senior director. But during the first months in her new role, she realized that she was feeling overwhelmed and frustrated. Sure, she was proud of her professional achievements – but her relationships with her husband and daughter were slipping. When Amy attended the authors’ “do what matters most” keynote at a conference, she realized that motivation alone was not enough. By the end of the presentation she understood a simple truth: having the drive to boost performance and productivity is great, but she now needed to step back and reshuffle her priorities. The key message here is: Start by assessing yourself and your current approach to your priorities. Before you can transform your approach to your priorities, you need to get a good grasp on where you currently stand. How do you do this? One approach is to break down your daily activities into the “do what matters most” matrix. It divides your daily activities into four categories. One refers to activities that are both high-stress and high-priority, another to activities that are low-stress and high-priority. And the two remaining categories represent activities that matter the least – stuff that’s either urgent and not important, or – in the last category – not urgent and not important. For example, if you wait a few days before an important business trip to make a booking, sorting out flights and accommodation would become a category one activity. People who spend all their lives doing category one stuff may appreciate the adrenaline rush, but they are also usually fire-fighting all the time – and that leads to burnout. Now, imagine you book that flight weeks ahead of time. This would count as a category two activity: low-stress, but still high-priority. If you plan ahead, you subject your body to less stress, and that leads to increased productivity. Finally, the other two categories can represent anything from unnecessary meetings to procrastination. Now ask yourself: How much time do I spend in each of the categories? According to the authors, only a quarter of your daily activities should be high-stress, high-priority. Seventy percent of your time should fall under category two: high priority, but low stress. What about the other, unimportant areas? Well, ideally, you should only spend 5 to 15 percent of your time in them. But in reality, we all gravitate towards these categories. It doesn’t have to be that way.

Get familiar with your priorities by forming a vision for each of your roles in life.

Let’s say you want to build your dream house. Before you put together a budget or even an architectural drawing, you have to fire up your imagination. You need to picture where the house will stand, how big it’ll be, and even how many bedrooms it’ll have. In the same way, when it comes to becoming the best version of yourself, you need to imagine the new you first – only then can you decide how to achieve it all. This sense of direction is known as your personal vision – a vivid image of where you want to end up. The key message here is: Get familiar with your priorities by forming a vision for each of your roles in life. The process of forming your personal vision will help you identify what matters most to you. Here’s how you get started. Put some time aside and grab something to write with – whether it’s pen and paper, or a spreadsheet on your

computer. The first step is to reflect on the following questions: Twenty years from now, what are some things you want to have accomplished? What would you like to improve about your life or your community? What qualities do you admire most in others? Now that you've got this list in front of you, think about the different roles you have in life. We all wear different hats each day. We can be parent, partner, manager, employee – and we can also be self-focused, trying to keep our bodies healthy and alive. Write out between five and seven of these roles. Under each one, jot down your specific vision for it. Use the present tense to make the mental reality even more vivid. You could write something like, I am an outstanding manager who inspires my team to do their best under work, or I choose to live a healthy lifestyle under self, or even I help to uplift or inspire my friends under friendships. You will know you've got the vision right if it evokes a range of emotions in you. You should feel excitement, but also a small degree of discomfort. This is because your vision is meant to help you grow. Its job is to direct you towards what really matters.

To boost productivity, set annual goals that are measurable and achievable.

One night, a father was working late into the night after skipping another dinner with his family. His young son walked up to him and asked: "Dad, how much do you earn in an hour?" The father answered, "\$40," to which the son replied, "Can I have \$20?" Frustrated by the distraction, the father snapped at his son to go to bed. But when he heard sniffles from the bedroom, the man guiltily went up to his son's bedside and handed him \$20. The boy, now grinning, reached for the piggy bank under his bed and put all his money together. He counted it up, held the coins and notes to his dad and said: "Now that I have \$40, can I buy an hour of your time?" This touching tale can serve as a reminder of why it's important to focus on what matters most. The best way to do that is by setting annual goals in your professional and personal life. Here's the key message: To boost productivity and performance, set annual goals that are measurable and achievable. Remember how you created a vision for each of your roles in life? Well, now it's time to create a plan for turning your vision into a reality. The tool you'll use is called goal-setting. The authors recommend setting goals for between now and the end of the year – unless, of course, you're reading these blinks in November or December, in which case it's fine to start the other side of Christmas. To begin, write down your roles in a row just as you did when forming your vision. Only this time, set annual goals for each role. A useful way to test if your goals are effective is to use the SMART acronym. It describes goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. For example, let's say one of your personal goals is to become physically fitter. To translate this into a SMART goal, you could write: Achieve a resting heart rate of 66 BPM by August 31st. Once you have your vision and goals set, place them somewhere in sight – perhaps on your desk or by your bathroom mirror. This way, you'll always refer to them – consciously or even subconsciously. We're nearly at the last step of the program – and, as you'll hear in the next blink, it's all about creating an action plan. The authors call it pre-weekly planning.

Manage your time more effectively using the pre-weekly planning tool.

Before each flight, a pilot goes through a process known as pre-flight planning. It takes up to ten hours and involves everything from researching the destination and weather conditions, to planning the route and checking that the plane is actually airworthy. Now, imagine if a pilot decided to skip this process even once. No doubt, the result would be chaos and confusion. In the same way as pre-flight planning is critical for pilots, pre-week planning is essential for every one of us if we want to remain in control of our lives. The key message here is: Manage your time more effectively using the pre-weekly planning tool. If you develop the habit of planning each week in advance, you'll be well set to transform your personal vision into reality. Maybe you already have a daily to-do list or sticky notes that remind you of just what needs to be done. But pre-week planning will take all of that to the next level. Each week, it will force you to reflect on your priorities and schedule what matters most. It doesn't matter whether you use a notepad or your laptop; it doesn't even matter what your plan looks like. It's the process of planning that counts. Look at your calendar and block off 20 to 45 minutes each week for this exercise. Most people choose to do their pre-week planning at the end of the previous week, for example, on Friday afternoon or over the weekend. Whatever you do, don't leave it until Monday morning. After all, the whole point is to plan your week before it starts. That gives you enough distance to see the big picture. So, it's the end of the week, and you're sitting down to plan. Here's how you do it. First, take a minute to review your personal vision and goals. You have them written down, don't you? Now ask yourself what you can do in the coming week to move towards your goals. Sometimes, the answer will be - nothing. For instance, you may want to organize a networking event by October 1st. If it's February, then, perhaps, you can't do anything to achieve that goal just yet. But if it's April, maybe you can create a list of invitees or send out an RSVP email. What matters is to schedule everything you want to do for a specific time and date. This way, you'll turn vague ideas into clear action items.

Schedule a specific time for each action item on your pre-week planning list.

John was a senior executive at PepsiCo. He'd been at the job for decades when he joined the authors' "do what matters most" workshop. During the vision building exercise, under his role as parent he wrote down one clear goal: Call my son. Somebody asked him why - and John said he had not spoken to his son since an argument seven years ago. So the authors invited John to create a deadline for his goal. It became, call my son at 7 pm on Wednesday. Six months later, in a follow-up workshop, John announced that he had accomplished his goal. Ever since the first phone call, father and son spoke weekly and even developed a new friendship. John's experience shows two things. Articulating your priorities is a critical first step, but scheduling your goals is what really makes all the difference. Here's the key message: Schedule a specific time for each action item on your pre-week planning list. You already know that goals should be measurable and time-bound. But your pre-weekly planning should also be specific. Each activity needs to have a time and a date. For example, if one of your goals is to mentor more juniors by the end of the month, here's what you could schedule in your diary: on Tuesday at 2pm, offer mentorship to Sue. The authors guarantee that, over a year, scheduling alone can increase your productivity by 50 to 80 percent. Pre-week planning works great for teams, too. There's just one thing to remember: planning together as a department doesn't mean individuals can ditch their own planning process. If you are a team leader, you can invite each member of your team to practice the three principles we discussed in previous blinks. They are: to develop a personal vision, to set annual

goals, and to do pre-week planning. Once each member of the team has adopted these habits, set up an all-hands meeting on Monday morning where everyone can align their weekly plan. It takes commitment and consistency to make goal-setting and pre-week planning second nature. But you'll soon find out that following your vision and scheduling clear priorities will make you productive. And if that's not enough, your life will become a lot less stressful, too!

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: You can boost productivity and performance by learning how to prioritize the tasks that matter most. To get familiar with your priorities, develop a personal vision and set annual goals for each role you play in life – professional or personal. Finally, boost your chances of success by scheduling weekly activities that can help you achieve your goals. Actionable advice: Review your priorities every morning. Pre-week planning is a great tool, but there's something else you can do to improve your productivity: develop a morning routine. Before you even roll out of bed, take a few minutes to review the action items you have scheduled for the day and identify the top two or three priorities. Starting the day on the right foot will make you more motivated and better focused.