



A Division of FileHeads Professional Organizers

SPECIAL REPORT # 5

When Everything is Important— How to Prioritize in an Urgency-induced, Quick Changing World

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WHAT DOES 'PRIORITIZING' MEAN?

If you had only ten minutes to evacuate before a flood threatened your home, your priority would likely be grabbing your family and heading for safety. You'd probably leave behind material possessions except your purse, wallet and keys in your pocket. The priority is the safety of your loved ones. If you had a few hours notice, you'd choose to pack a few things - a change of clothes, some food, irreplaceable photographs, and maybe you'd download computer data to a zip drive. Your priorities can expand beyond survival to sentimentality and comfort and material importance **if you have time**. "A flood is amazingly clarifying. All of a sudden it becomes crystal clear what is important and what you can do without," Beth told me when I interviewed her for a book I wrote about disaster preparedness.

Under the duress of a disaster, it's clear what your priorities are. But what about the typical, everyday flood of tasks and obligations, to-do items and projects that all seem to cry out 'Do me first'? In some ways, the thinking is the same as in a crisis. You make a choice as to what is most important **in the time available to you**, and you revise your choices if conditions change. Learning to prioritize is a valuable self-management skill. In this economy, when companies are retaining only the most productive workers, it becomes even more imperative. When you prioritize you make proactive decisions that put you in charge of what you do and when you do it. That might sound difficult to believe if you think you have no choice or you feel you don't control your time. Rick, an advertising manager, called me to get organized. "My boss calls the shots about what I have to do and when and I don't have anybody to delegate to," Rick told me. He felt overwhelmed all the time.

We scrutinized his workload and found great ways for Rick to prioritize his work. He discovered he does have a measure of control and does not have to be reactive to every thing that is thrown his way. For example, Rick decided to:

- First do the things that immediately affect the company's bottom line.
- Work on existing projects for 30 minutes in the morning before checking email.
- Get a particularly annoying supervisor off his back by doing his work next.
- Set up 45 minutes every day as 'office hours' so he can be accessible to co-workers and have the remainder of the day less interrupted.

PERPETUAL PRIORITIZING

To-do lists today are endless. You could work all day every day and never finish because the opportunity to research more, learn more, propose more, consider more, discuss more, plan more, and do more is nearly unlimited. Prioritizing is what will keep you sane given this reality. It is the *continual* process of committing to doing tasks *to the exclusion of other task*. The reason it is continual is because new tasks are always popping up unplanned and need to be shuffled into your priority deck efficiently, if it is appropriate to do them at all. And because there are more tasks than ever before, chances are there will be competing priorities that will need to be resolved. It starts with a to-do list. But it doesn't end there. "A to-do list is not a commitment. When you schedule a task,