



# LEVEL SETTING PRIORITIES

How to transform your organization's execution strategy

BY DUSTIN WEAVER

As the Oil and Gas industry starts to heat up with the upswing in commodity prices, so does the number of competing priorities. We have all been warned to never over-promise and under deliver, but the opposite of this will get you into the same mess or leave your stakeholders underwhelmed. So where does this leave us as a society that continually asks for more out of our employees, consultants and stakeholders? Who decides where the priorities align, when there is a proliferation of priorities, or (as my wife says) when there is a horizontal priority list? For example, a land manager may need a new capital project, while simultaneously requiring a significant time investment in an on-going operations request. Which priority is more important and who decides the order of execution? Have realistic expectations been set with all stakeholders? This example leads to a few tools that can be utilized in accessing your priority list with your department and organization's overall execution strategy.

## Communication

It starts with having a good line of communication to your customers, direct manager and other functional leaders to ensure that everyone is working toward accomplishing the same goal. For example, five years ago a customer requested a new pipeline project between Gas Gathering system A and Gas Gathering system B to use efficiencies in each system for transporting their product.

This is a typical request, but during the course of the project, the customer also decided that they needed five new well connect lines along the route to be connected during the construction of the mainline. This was great news, but bad timing for the project team. Now the priority had shifted from getting the line complete between the system and it also required brand new scopes for the new well connects, as well as a rework of the alignments for all of the surface facilities needed to make the connections. This example taught the project team to ask other qualifying questions to the customer to ensure that everyone had the same goals in mind. Additionally, the team learned to identify "black swans" in the field, which are items that tell you the hidden or neglected information in a conversation. For this scenario, the customer was building lease roads and new well pads in the area, which should have triggered additional qualifying questions. As the great sociologist/novelist George Bernard Shaw said, "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."

## Realistic Expectations

It is important to set realistic expectations about what, when and how a task or series of tasks can be accomplished. It may be the project director's job to assign the work, but it is our job to determine how it can be done using the existing constrained resources available to all of us. Begin by analyzing



the request, looking for factors that may affect the project timeline and those which could be out of your control, such as specific permits, funding delays or contract resource restraints. Second, ask qualifying questions about projected dates, the larger picture and final strategy. Last, keep in mind that no one person may have all of the answers, so regularly communicating your progress with the team will be paramount in successfully completing your task. Setting expectations and communicating the action items involved will help to eliminate miscommunication and dropped responsibilities. This is especially true for leaders who delegate the tasks, since they must make sure their expectations are 10 times as clear.

### Synergizing Resources

No one person or group can operate efficiently in a vacuum, so regular meetings with other functional groups are a must in order to gain the valuable insight of the overarching strategy of a project. I am not suggesting meetings for the sake of meetings, but they should be value-based engagements that have mutual consideration of information being shared. Next, identify which task can run in parallel with other tasks without having a hard phase-gate. This will take experience, but once

you've gained an understanding of the flow of tasks and its interconnecting pieces, the process will add great value to level-setting your priorities. Lastly, coordinate activities in conjunction with other groups to synergize resources. This piece can be crucial (especially on budget-restrained projects), but it can also be a detriment to timing. This skill of knowing when to synergize resources and when not to will come with project experience, but one insightful tip is to understand your hard dates for each task and plan accordingly with other functions.

### Executing on Priorities

In summary, ensure that communication is clear and concise, set realistic expectations with stakeholders, synergize resources and information with the team, and write your priorities down to track your progress. After all, when everything is a priority, does anything get prioritized?

Just look at The Ivy Lee Method for prioritization, which has lasted through the testament of time. In 1918, steel mogul Charles Schwab was desperate for an answer to help his executives make better use of their time. As the story goes, Schwab arranged a meeting with

the highly respected productivity consultant, Ivy Lee, in hopes of transforming his men and their productivity efforts. Ivy said he only needed 15 minutes with each executive and he would not charge Schwab a fee unless productivity increased over the course of three months. Here were the instructions that Ivy relayed to the executives:

- 1) At the end of each work day, write down the six most important things you need to accomplish tomorrow. Do not write down more than six tasks.
- 2) Prioritize those six items in order of their true importance.
- 3) When you arrive tomorrow, concentrate only on the first task. Work until the first task is finished before moving on to the second task.
- 4) Approach the rest of your list in the same fashion. At the end of the day, move any unfinished items to a new list of six tasks for the following day.
- 5) Repeat this process every working day.

At the end of the three months, Schwab wrote Ivy a check for \$25,000 in payment for the dramatic increase in productivity out of his executive team. 🌟



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