JUDGMENT

The Leadership Discipline of Choosing

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PETERSEN PHILOSOPHY SERIES

Why prioritization is the bridge between Judgment and Execution

Most leaders do not fail for lack of good ideas. They fail because they never choose among them. Every initiative survives, every request gets a yes, and the organization spreads its people, money, and attention so thinly that nothing important receives what it needs to succeed.

Prioritization is where Judgment becomes visible. A leader can say the right things about strategy, values, and purpose; the calendar, the budget, and the staffing chart reveal what that leader actually believes matters. That is why prioritization is not an administrative skill. It is a leadership discipline, and it sits squarely between deciding and doing.

The Central Argument

> ***CENTRAL ARGUMENT***
>
> ***Leadership is not simply deciding what matters. It is deciding what matters most - and then aligning time, people, money, attention, and accountability behind it.***

The first half of that sentence is Judgment. The second half is Execution. Prioritization is the bridge between them, and it has two load-bearing parts:

1. Ranking. Distinguishing what matters most from what is merely important, urgent, or loud.
2. Alignment. Moving real resources to match the ranking, so the organization's behavior reflects its stated priorities.

A leader who ranks but does not align has produced an opinion. A leader who aligns without ranking has produced activity. Only the two together produce results.

If Everything Is a Priority, Nothing Is a Priority

> ***PETERSEN TEACHING PRINCIPLE***
>
> ***If everything is a priority, nothing is a priority.***

The observation itself is not new; versions of it circulate widely in management writing. Its value as a Petersen teaching principle comes from how it is applied: as a test of Character (will I choose?), Culture (does everyone know what wins?), and Execution (do the resources follow?),

and as the companion to the question, "What are we willing not to do so that what matters most actually gets done?"

Greg McKeown uses the history of the word "priority" in Essentialism (2014) to make a useful rhetorical point: a priority is supposed to identify what comes first. Whether an organization has three priorities or twelve, the practical issue is the same. When two claims compete for the same person, the same dollar, or the same afternoon, does everyone know which one wins?

If the answer is "it depends on who you ask," the organization does not have priorities. It has a list.

Labeling everything a priority feels safe because no one is told no. It is actually the riskier choice. The decision about what gets neglected is still made, but now it is made by default - by whoever is busiest, loudest, or closest to the resource - rather than by the leader.

Nine Tools, Three Levels of Choosing

David Meade's infographic, How High-Performing Leaders Prioritise, groups nine familiar tools into three levels: team, personal, and resource. The grouping is the useful insight. Prioritization is not one skill; a leader chooses at every level, and each level has its own failure mode.

Level	Tool / source	What it helps a leader decide
Team	MoSCoW Clegg & Barker, 1994	What is in scope now: Must Have, Should Have, Could Have, and Won't Have this time.
Team	RICE McBride, Intercom, 2018	Which initiative offers the greatest expected impact relative to effort, while making confidence explicit.
Team	Kano model Kano et al., 1984	Which features are expected basics, which drive satisfaction, and which create delight.
Personal	Eisenhower matrix Eisenhower, 1954; Covey, 1989	Whether a task is important, urgent, both, or neither - and therefore what deserves protected attention.
Personal	Eat That Frog Tracy, 2001	Which difficult, high-value task deserves action before easier work crowds it out.

Personal	"5/25" exercise Popularly misattributed to Buffett	Which few goals to pursue and which good goals to refuse or defer. Useful exercise; not a Buffett rule.
Resource	Pareto principle Pareto; Juran	Where a relatively small number of causes, customers, activities, or choices drive a disproportionate share of results.
Resource	Weighted scoring General multi-criteria method	Which option best fits several criteria when those criteria do not carry equal importance.
Resource	ICE Sean Ellis; Ellis & Brown, 2017	Which experiment or initiative to test first when speed and simplicity matter.

Two scoring formulas are especially useful to state clearly:

> ***RICE = (Reach x Impact x Confidence) / Effort***
>
> ***ICE = (Impact + Confidence + Ease) / 3 [one common convention]***

McBride's RICE method uses Reach, Impact, Confidence, and Effort; Intercom publishes specific impact and confidence scales and treats effort in person-months. ICE is lighter-weight: Impact, Confidence, and Ease are commonly rated on a 1-10 scale. Some practitioners multiply the three ICE scores rather than average them. The important leadership lesson is consistency: a scoring method should clarify judgment, not manufacture false precision.

The deeper lesson is what all nine tools share. Each forces some version of an explicit 'not now': the Won't Have category, the low scoring initiative, the non-urgent task, or the large amount of activity outside the vital few. The tools do not choose for the leader. They make the cost of not choosing visible.

Prioritization Through the Petersen Leadership Model

The tools explain how to rank. The Petersen Leadership Model explains why leaders so often fail to rank and align. The breakdown is rarely only technical. It is more often a failure of courage, communication, discernment, culture, follow-through, or personal discipline.

Model element	The prioritization question	What it looks like when done well
Character Who you are	Do I have the courage to make difficult trade-offs?	Say no to a good idea, a valued colleague, or a pet project - and own the decision. Useful tools: MoSCoW "Won't Have"; focus exercise.
Style How you lead	Can I communicate priorities differently to different people without changing the standard?	The analyst may get the scoring and the frontline team the story, but everyone hears the same priorities. Useful tools: MoSCoW; Kano.
Judgment How you decide	Can I distinguish what matters most from what merely demands attention?	Separate important from urgent and ask what the evidence supports before ranking. Useful tools: Eisenhower; RICE; ICE; weighted scoring.
Culture What you create	Does the organization know what really matters, or is everything labeled a priority?	People can name the top priorities and know which one wins when priorities conflict. Useful tools: MoSCoW; Pareto.
Execution How results are achieved	Are resources and accountability actually aligned with those priorities?	Budgets, staffing, calendars, owners, and dates match the ranking. Useful tools: RICE; Pareto; weighted scoring.
Life How you live and what you leave behind	Am I applying the same discipline to my own time, energy, commitments, and longer-term legacy?	Protect time for important work, prune commitments, and make choices that serve people and mission beyond the next quarter. Useful tools: Eisenhower; Eat That Frog; Pareto.

Two patterns stand out. First, Judgment is where most of the analytical tools live, which is why prioritization is often mistaken for an analytical skill. Second, the hardest failures sit elsewhere: in Character, when a leader knows the right choice and lacks the will to make it; and in Execution, when the right choice is announced but the budget, staffing, or calendar never moves.

Style deserves a specific note. A leader can tailor how a priority is explained; a leader cannot quietly give different people different priorities. Adapting the message is good leadership.

Adapting the standard is how organizations end up with twelve "top priorities."

From Strategy to Execution: Prioritization in the BTP

In the Business Transformation Plan (BTP), prioritization is not a separate step. It is the thread that runs from direction to action:

1. Mission and Vision determine direction: why we exist and where we are going.
2. Strategy establishes choices: where we will compete and, by implication, where we will not.
3. Objectives identify what must be accomplished: the few results that matter most in this period.
4. The Tactical Action Plan (TAP) converts priorities into execution: owners, actions, dates, and resources.

Each step narrows the one before it. Mission allows many strategies; strategy allows many objectives; objectives allow many actions. At every handoff, a leader must decide what stays in and what comes out. When that narrowing does not happen, the TAP inherits everything, and the people closest to the work are left to sort it out themselves.

> ***Strategy without prioritization becomes a wish list.Prioritization without execution becomes an intention.Leadership connects the two.***

The tools map naturally onto the BTP. Pareto and weighted scoring can help test strategic choices. MoSCoW and RICE can help select and sequence Objectives. The Eisenhower matrix can keep the TAP from being consumed by the urgent. And the discipline behind the so-called 5/25 exercise applies at every level: if a plan carries more than a handful of true priorities, it probably has not finished choosing.

The Senior Leadership Question

> ***SENIOR LEADERSHIP QUESTION***
>
> ***What are we willing not to do so that what matters most actually gets done?***

Most prioritization conversations ask what to add. This question asks what to give up, and that is why it belongs at the senior table. Time management is about sequencing a personal to-do list. Senior leadership is about allocating scarce organizational resources among competing goods.

The question works because it makes trade-offs concrete. "We are prioritizing customer retention" costs nothing to say. "We are pausing the second product launch until retention reaches target" costs something. That cost is evidence that the priority is real.

Three Tests That Make Priorities Real

The resource test. If this is truly a priority, what budget, people, or time are we moving to it - and from where?

The conflict test. When this priority competes with another, which wins, and does everyone know?

The stop test. What current activity will end, shrink, or wait because of this choice?

If a team cannot answer all three, it has not yet prioritized. It has only agreed on what it likes.

Questions for Reflection

For the Individual Leader

1. If my calendar from the last two weeks were my only statement of priorities, what would it say?
2. Which "good" commitment am I keeping that is crowding out a great one?
3. What decision have I been postponing because it requires telling someone no?

For the Leadership Team

1. Can each of us name the organization's top three priorities in the same order?
2. Which priority has an owner, a date, and a budget - and which only has a slide?
3. What did we stop doing in the last 90 days to make room for what matters most?

For the Whole Organization

1. When two priorities collide, who decides, and how quickly?
2. Do our people believe that saying no to a lower priority will be supported?

Conclusion

Prioritization is the moment Judgment becomes visible and Execution becomes possible. The frameworks matter because they bring discipline, consistency, and evidence to hard choices. But no matrix will make a choice for a leader who lacks the courage to make it, and no score will move a budget that the leader will not move.

That is why prioritization belongs in a leadership model rather than a productivity manual. It draws on Character to make trade-offs, Style to communicate them, Judgment to make them well, Culture to sustain them, Execution to fund and deliver them, and Life to practice them personally and shape what is ultimately left behind.

> ***If everything is a priority, nothing is a priority. The leader's job is to choose - and then to make the choice real.***

A Note on Sources

Prioritization tools travel quickly, and their origin stories often travel with them uncorrected. The distinctions below matter because a useful leadership lesson does not need a false attribution to be useful.

- The "5/25 rule" is not a Warren Buffett rule. At Berkshire Hathaway's 2013 annual meeting, Buffett was asked about the supposed method and replied that it "really isn't the case." The exercise may still be useful; it simply should not be presented as Buffett's method.
- Eisenhower did not invent the four-quadrant matrix. In his August 19, 1954 Evanston address, he explicitly quoted an unnamed former college president on "urgent" and "important" problems. Stephen Covey later popularized the four-quadrant treatment in The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People (1989).
- MoSCoW is associated with Dai Clegg and Richard Barker's 1994 CASE Method Fast-Track and later became a core DSDM prioritization technique.
- RICE was published by Sean McBride on Intercom's blog in January 2018. Its factors are Reach, Impact, Confidence, and Effort.
- The modern "eat a frog" productivity tactic is correctly associated with Brian Tracy's Eat That Frog!, but the underlying saying is not supported as a Mark Twain quotation. Quote Investigator traces the saying's roots to the French writer Nicolas Chamfort and related variants.
- Joseph Juran popularized the Pareto principle as a general "vital few" concept after Pareto's work on wealth distribution. The 80/20 relationship is a heuristic, not a universal mathematical law.
- ICE is commonly scored by averaging or multiplying Impact, Confidence, and Ease. Teams should choose a convention, define the scale, and use it consistently.

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