

Your Top Priority Should Be Your Top Priority

By Justin Locke

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How do you determine your top priority?

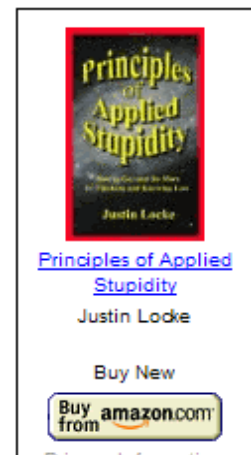
Too often, leaders get bogged down by routine, and they fail to meaningfully answer that question.

One's top priority may be simple and obvious, but often it is glaringly difficult to confront. Fear of the impediments to tackling key priorities head-on has spawned an entire economy of lower-level alternative approaches that promise faster results with less effort. With so many people earnestly selling so many tips and tricks that promise a simple and easy fix, it is very easy to eagerly latch on to one of them and fall into what I call the rut of the "if-then" statement.



For example, a common if-then statement goes something like this: "If we remove all defects, then our customers will be thrilled." This sounds great on paper. It guarantees success without too much nasty introspection, and it sounds even better when you realize that it frees you from actually listening to what all those pesky customers have to say.

When an if-then policy like this gets adopted, everyone mindlessly focuses on removing defects and forgets the highest priority – actually satisfying customers. Your customers may not care about minor defects. Instead, they may want your product in a different color, or maybe they just want someone to talk to them. Sadly, the if-then statement makes us focus on a lower priority, defect removal, and we lose track of the highest priority, improving the customer's overall experience.



When I was a professional double-bass player, I often performed for conductors who were stuck on an if-then statement. One conductor adopted a truly wacky and totally unique policy: His bass players must vibrato on every note. (Vibrato refers to moving the left hand to create voice-like oscillations in pitch.) His theory: "If the bass player vibratos, then the whole show will be better."

But this was a performance of *Swan Lake*, and in a ballet pit orchestra, vibrato by the bass



players is meaningless. It is far more important that the bass players crank out as much volume as possible, so the violas and the dancers can hear the downbeats. Vibrato actually diminishes volume, and when you're playing a low F on a string bass in a pit, no one (myself included) can hear vibrato anyway.

This guy watched me like a hawk, and if I didn't rock my fingers back and forth on every single note, he got on my case. He was convinced that double-bass vibrato was the key to success. So I did what he wanted. Neither the dancers nor the violas could hear the downbeat, and the audience experience suffered.

He was fired at the end of the season, but I did a great job of vibrato-ing.

He had completely lost track of his highest priority.

I am not immune to the siren song of the if-then statement. When I decided to become an author, I truly believed the "if-then" that all the wannabe-author books contained: If you want to be a published author, then you have to get an agent. I am embarrassed to report that after two years and \$400 spent on postage, my quest for an agent got me absolutely nowhere. My if-then approach had yielded massive failure, so I sat down and reexamined my priorities.

My highest priority was to get published, so I dropped the if-then statement. I sent the files to a local print shop.

Three weeks later, I was published. Three months later, I was sold out.

I heard a very convincing lecture about managing change in organization, in which the speaker said, "If you wish to institute organizational change, then you have to make people feel uncomfortable." There is some occasional truth in that, but when I heard it, I cringed. I knew there would be some freshman manager who was going to fall in love with this very impressive if-then statement and spend the rest of their career constantly making people feel uncomfortable as a matter of policy.

Like that vibrato-loving conductor, it is very easy to fall into one of these oh-so-appealing and simple if-then states of mind. They create an illusion of control and power, and they conveniently save you from having to face the tough reality of your highest priority – fulfilling the ever-shifting needs of your clients.

The primary job of a leader is to establish the highest priority. Sometimes you have to add processes to achieve that priority, but more often you must eliminate whatever gets in the way of things you're already doing. Leaders who don't see and serve their highest priorities, and instead just follow a pet theoretical procedure whether or not it works, quickly lose their way – and the respect of the people working for them.



Real success comes from serving your highest priority, not from fervent devotion to any one element of the process.

Justin Locke is a speaker based in Boston. He spent 18 seasons playing the bass with the Boston Pops, and he is the author of several books, including "Real Men Don't Rehearse" (a musical memoir) and "Principles of Applied Stupidity," a look at how to be more productive and effective by going against the conventional wisdom. See more by visiting his website at www.justinlocke.com.

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