

Living the 21 Laws of Leadership

The Law of Priorities Leaders Understand that Activity is Not Necessarily Accomplishment

“If I had eight hours to chop down a tree, I’d spend six sharpening my axe.”

— Abraham Lincoln

Application Guide

Have you ever been running at break neck speed throughout the day, doing what seems like a hundred things, only to wonder what you actually accomplished at the end of the day? Every leader has had some of those days. The leaders who have very few of those days, understand and practice the *Law of Priorities*. John Wooden was one such leader.

John Wooden is the former head basketball coach of the UCLA Bruins. The greatest evidence of Wooden's ability to make the *Law of Priorities* work for him could be seen in the way he approached basketball practice. Wooden claimed that he learned some of his methods from watching Frank Leahy, the great former Notre Dame football head coach. He said, "I often went to his [Leahy's] practices and observed how he broke them up into periods. Then I would go home and analyze why he did things certain ways. As a player, I realized there was a great deal of time wasted. Leahy's concepts reinforced my ideas and helped in the ultimate development of what I do now."

Wooden orchestrated every minute of practice and planned each activity with specific purposes in mind. Every year, Wooden determined a list of overall priorities for the team, based on observations from the previous season. Those items might include objectives such as, "build confidence in Drollinger and Irgovich" or "use 3 on 2 continuity drill at least three times a week." He usually had about a dozen or so items which he wanted to work on throughout the season. Wooden also reviewed his agenda for his teams every day. Each morning, he and an assistant would meticulously plan the day's practice. They usually spent two hours strategizing for a practice that might not even last that long. He drew ideas from notes jotted on 3x5 cards that he always carried with him. He planned every drill, minute by minute, and recorded the information in a notebook prior to practice.

Wooden always maintained his focus, and he found ways for his players to do the same thing. His special talent was for addressing several priority areas at once. For example, to help players work on their free throws — something that many of them found tedious — Wooden instituted a free-throw shooting policy during scrimmages that would encourage them to concentrate and improve instead of just marking time. The sooner a sidelined player made a set number of shots, the sooner he could get back into action. Wooden also continually changed the number of shots required by the guards, forwards, and centers so that team members rotated in and out at different rates. That way everyone, regardless of position or starting status, got experience playing together, a critical priority for Wooden's development of total teamwork.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about John Wooden — and the most telling about his ability to focus on his priorities — is that he never scouted opposing teams. He would allow nothing to prevent him from focusing on his priorities. He believed in focusing on getting the Bruins to reach their potential, and devoted every minute to that end. He addressed those things through practice and personal interaction with the players. It was never his goal to win championships or even beat the other team. His desire was to get each person to play to his potential and put the best possible team on the floor.

The results were incredible. In more than 40 years of coaching basketball, he lost only one season and that was his first one. He led the UCLA teams to 4 undefeated seasons and a record 10 NCAA championships. Wooden was a great leader — and one of the top reasons was that he lived the *Law of Priorities*.

I. Assessment

The following questions will give you insight as to how well you are living the *Law of Priorities*.

- A. Do you know what you do that produces the greatest results and rewards?
- B. Do you concentrate 80% of your time on the top 20% of your priorities?
- C. Do you occasionally find yourself making excuses for not prioritizing your work?
- D. Are each of your key personnel focused on their priorities?
- E. What one priority are you not doing now, that would greatly increase your productivity?
- F. Is it more difficult for you to set your priorities or to work your priorities?
- G. What two or three things you are now investing your time in that are non-priority areas?
What is preventing you from eliminating or delegating them?
- H. Do you tend to do the most important first or the most pleasurable first?
- I. Do you find yourself chased by the urgent or committed to the important?

II. Application

I have learned over the years that there is a great difference between establishing your priorities and working your priorities. Establishing your priorities is a good start, and it is surprising how many leaders do not do this, but if you do not actually work them — it is all for not. Remember, if you do not establish your priorities, someone else will.

A. Establishing Your Priorities

Take this simple quiz on “excuses” for not prioritizing. Check the ones true for you.

- I do not have time.

- I do not know how.
- I do not know what the priorities are.
- I do not want to face the reality of having too many priorities to accomplish.
- I blame my lack of prioritizing or poor prioritizing on my supervisor.
- I enjoy doing lower or non-priority responsibilities.
- It is easier to do whatever screams loudest for my attention.
- You fill in the blank: _____.

Whatever your “excuses” may be, my desire is to encourage and equip you to be successful at prioritizing. The following guidelines will help you live the *Law of Priorities*.

1. Determine what you do best.

In my book I give you 3 questions, here in the application guide I have an expanded set of 7 questions for you to answer to help you determine what you do best.

✓ What are you _____ for?

What do others recognize in you as a special or unique ability?

✓ What is _____ of you?

What are the main things you must do? If you do this list correctly, it will be a short list. It is likely that there are several things you do that you do not have to do.

✓ What are you _____ for?

What are the things that cause others to seek you out and want your advice or involvement.

✓ What are you _____ most highly for?

With all the fringe stripped away, what are you really paid to do?

✓ What produces the greatest _____?

What 3-5 things do you do to produce the most significant, measurable, life-changing or profit-producing results?

✓ What do you _____ over?

What is it that you most enjoy doing?

✓ What do you want to be _____ for?

What, when it is all said and done, do you want to be remembered for?

2. Focus your organization on what they do _____, according to the mission, and what _____ the greatest results.

The preceding point emphasized the personal aspect of what you as the leader does best because that has a tremendous impact on what the rest of the organization does. The gifts and strengths of the leader always influence the direction, emphasis and even personality of the organization. This point focuses on the whole organization doing what it does best.

Bob Taylor is the president and owner of Taylor Guitars in San Diego, California. Building guitars is what they do best. Bob himself is a genius craftsman and a wise businessman. Bob's entire company focuses on what they all do well, make guitars — nothing else. They literally have dozens of gifted craftsmen. That is their mission, and it is also what produces the greatest results. They are not organized or designed to build banjos or violins, or start giving guitar lessons to would be students and wanna-be rock stars! Their mission is to build the best guitars in the world, and that is what they are doing.

3. Keep your list of true priorities _____.

As you think through what the list of priorities for your organization are, the list needs to be short. I can not tell you how long your list should be, it is different for everyone, but I will say if it is more than 5, it is likely to be too long. Somewhere between 1 and 5 is about as much as any organization can focus on.

In my book, I wrote about Jack Welch, chairman and CEO of General Electric. When he took leadership in 1981, it was a huge and diverse company which included some 350 strategic businesses. Within a few months of taking over the company, he began what he called the "hardware revolution." About each of the hundreds of businesses and product lines, Welch asked: "Can they be number 1 or 2 at whatever they do in the world marketplace? Of the 348 businesses that could not, they closed some and divested others. With the revenue from the sale of those businesses, only 14 world-class businesses were kept, each one either the first or second in the world market in which it participates.

4. Conduct a major annual evaluation of your priorities according to the changing marketplace, needs and demands of the people.

Things change, and the marketplace demands that you change as well. If you manufac-

ture, changes in your product are needed. If you provide a service, the people want you to keep up with the times in improvements. If you lead a non-profit organization such as a church, the people want and need you to stay true to the cause.

Every year, a major review of your priorities needs to take place, with careful attention to not only what you are going to do, but how you are going to do it.

In the example of a church, or any non-profit with a cause, the cause must never change, but how you go about it may change dramatically. The mission remains but the methods change!

B. Working your priorities

1. _____ and _____ the non-productive activity.

Both on a personal level and an organizational level, you must eliminate non-productive activity to realize the benefits of the *Law of Priorities*.

✓ Stop doing what does not _____.

Gather the key people together and be tough on yourselves and the organization. Make a list of the things that really do not make a difference. Cut them. It may take some time to make the cuts, but do it.

✓ Stop doing what does not _____.

There are a few things you are doing that do not work. They do not produce results. There are many reasons for doing what, on paper, seems illogical; such as keeping tradition or protecting jobs. If you continue to do what does not work, you will soon be out of work!

✓ Stop doing what _____ can _____.

This is good old-fashioned delegation. Find the best people to do the job, paid or volunteer, and delegate!

2. Design a _____ to keep yourself on track.

It is our nature, both personal and corporate to veer off track. In order to stay on track, you must ask yourself the tough questions both before and after each days efforts. Before each day, review the seven questions I listed in the first point under "Establishing Your Priorities" (*recognized, requested, required, results, reward, rejoice and remembered*) and then write you list of "to-do's" beginning with the most difficult and highest priority first.

At the end of the day, review whether or not, (and why), you accomplished what you set out to accomplish. Use this information to set the priorities for the next day.

If you and the whole team does this on a daily basis, the entire organization will stay on track.

3. Separate the _____ from the _____.

Dwight Eisenhower was known for a great statement, he often said: "Urgent things are seldom important, and important things are seldom urgent." This could be included in the last idea about staying on track, but it is so important, and so many leaders fail at this, it bears standing alone. We are often caught up in the urgent, and thereby omit or delay the important.

In the local church, a hospital call is urgent, but evangelism is important. In a dentist office, an infected tooth is urgent but dental hygiene is important. While driving your car, a blow-out of a tire is urgent, but purchasing quality tires is important. In each of these scenarios, we tend to put off the important for the urgent.

How about you? What important things in your life or organization are being delayed for urgent things?

4. Allow _____ in your planning in order to accomplish your priorities.

One of my leadership weaknesses is attempting to do too much in too little time. The demands on my schedule are heavy and I love to say yes! So much so, that I have a small group of people who comprise what I call my "Hatchet Committee," and their purpose is to keep me to my four main priorities.

I recommend that you allow 10% more time everyday to accomplish what you set out to accomplish. When you plan too much, the quality drops, which in turn, lessens the overall productivity in the long run.

5. Conduct a brief priorities check-up at the end of each _____, _____, and _____.

Review:

- ✓ Where you are headed (think priorities!)
- ✓ How you will get there
- ✓ And, whether or not you are on track

Modify your plans accordingly.

6. Conduct a major review and evaluation of how well you are working your priorities _____ a year.

This is the same process as above, but on a larger scale. Use your notes from the monthly and quarterly "check-ups" for insight as you plan for the next year to year and a half. This major review and evaluation may call for significant changes in the budget, personnel or other important areas. Keep your mind open to whatever it takes to stay on track with your priorities.

III. Action Assignment

Set aside an afternoon or two and review in detail where you have invested your time in the last 6 months. Choose about 4 or 5 major categories that you find most of your time flowing to, and place all activity, (in terms of time) into one of those categories.

Next, ask yourself, and if applicable, your supervisor, if these are your true priorities. Evaluate what you do against the "seven r's". Do whatever is necessary to align what you do in the next 6 months with your true priorities.