

Making Prioritization a Priority: Finding and Focusing on What Matters

By Joe Whitefield

Facilities managers do many things extremely well. And that is good, because we are responsible for many things. Everyone on campus is affected daily, in some way, by almost every area we manage. This is because the operations and capital programs of facilities management are the very core of a safe, functional, and clean campus. In all of these areas the demands are numerous, the expectations are high, and the budgets limited (some more than others).

For these reasons there is, and always will be, a premium on timely, effective decision making in facilities management. Decision makers must be concerned with details like budgets, best value, quality, efficiency, short-term and long-term economics, and so forth. Effective decision-making is the process of evaluating alternatives against each other, and against a prioritized list of standards or objectives.

So it stands to reason that to be effective at making decisions one must be effective at prioritizing. I would go so far as to say, regardless of the project, initiative, or activity being managed, the primary role of the facilities manager will always be that of *Chief Prioritizer*. In this role the facilities manager must understand the costs of decision making and constantly assess what matters, what matters more, and what matters most.

THE PROBLEM OF “NO”

Decision making itself is a seemingly

simple proposition. Inevitably, challenges and difficulties arise because saying “yes” to one alternative means saying “no” to others (and by alternatives, I mean the people presenting the alternatives). As long as resources are limited, there will always be projects and initiatives that “fall below the line” or “just don’t make the cut.” Economists call this opportunity cost – the lost benefits from forgone options that result from choosing another option. Regular people have other names for this.

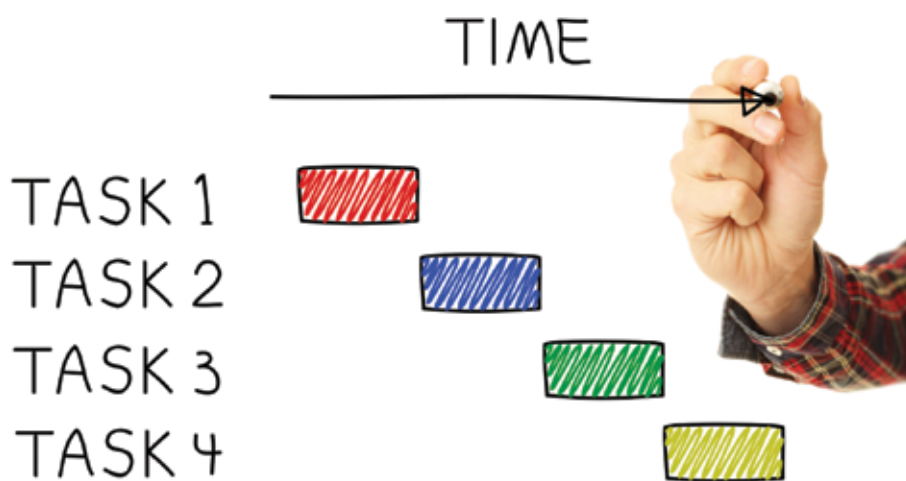
Simply saying “no” is problematic. However, it is much more difficult actually living with the “no” than simply saying it. That’s because forgone options have some benefits that will no longer be realized. People willingly give up a service in favor of another when budget reductions call for it, only to complain when the eliminated service is no longer

C Completion
O Organization
I Innovation
N Being Nice

performed. This form of economic amnesia sets in when service expectations continue after the service is reduced or eliminated.

DETERMINING WHAT MATTERS

Because living without some services is so difficult, great attention should be given to the services that are being performed. In essence, more focus should be placed on what you are doing than what you are not. This begins with



the act of prioritization. This means determining what really matters. The more limited the resources, the more challenging—and important—this is.

Part of the prioritization process involves comparing various costs and benefits of different options to determine the relative value of each. This can be tricky. When making these comparisons, I often hear, “It’s the right thing to do.” I hope the majority of things we do are the right things. Setting priorities among right and wrong things is not that challenging. Many times we must choose between many right things. In the case of significant budget cuts, there will be many right things that will be left on the cutting-room floor. This requires the facilities manager, as chief prioritizer, to take the process beyond establishing simply what matters, to establishing and ranking what matters more and possibly, what matters most.

In this effort, compliance items must be given top priority followed by best value projects, initiatives, and services. Tough times require a commitment to value-based prioritization and the discipline to follow through. Especially when amnesia sets in. Once you determine the thing being evaluated is a right thing, the next question to answer is: Is it worth it? What are the costs? What are the benefits? Compared to what? Value assessments are critical. They prove themselves when the priority projects are being performed, and sustain an organization when the forgone projects are not being performed.

Good judgment and sound decision-making are essential qualities for healthy organizations. Thomas Sowell says the most important decision is “who’s making the decision.” Make no mistake—facilities managers are key decision makers within our organizations, and these decisions affect everyone on campus in one way or another. These affects come from both the projects and services we perform and the projects and services we forgo. Prioritization is a critical early step in making sound decisions.

Don’t be led into poor decisions by getting caught unprepared. Before you make any important decisions, know your customers, know your requirements and constraints, and set those priorities. It will be easier to justify decisions on the front end, and defend decisions on the back end, if they are based on an undis-

putable set of priorities. Set the stage for good decision making—make prioritization a priority. ☎

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