

the early bird gets the worm

[strategic prioritization pays off]

EDITORIAL | JEFF MOWATT

It may be a popular advertising slogan — our customers are our number one priority — but as a manager, **buying into that strategy will actually reduce your effectiveness and damage your business.** I learned it the hard way.

More than 15 years ago, when I started my customer service speaking and training business, I was my only employee. I was doing everything: delivering speeches and seminars, strategic planning, handling suppliers, and of course taking out the trash. When writing my lengthy 'to-do' lists, I'd always rank customers as being my number one priority. Unfortunately, it took me five years to discover that I'd been making a huge mistake. Up until then, I hadn't realized that the most important priority should not be the customer. As a manager, your number one priority should be working on high-payoff, business-building projects.





JEFF MOWATT

This article is based on the book **Becoming a Service Icon in 90 Minutes a Month**, by Jeff Mowatt. Visit the author's website at jeffmowatt.com or call 800-566-9288.

Determining Top Priorities

With private sector companies, your biggest priority as a manager is to maximize long-term revenues while minimizing long-term costs. Period.

Managers cannot ensure the long-term viability of their organization by working on administrivia and responding to customer crises all day. That's just treating symptoms rather than correcting underlying problems. It certainly didn't work for me in the first five years of running my company. It wasn't until I'd made a slight realignment to my working day that my productivity dramatically improved. I could work fewer hours and get more done. I had fewer crises and a lot less stress. And my business boomed. Best of all, I found that it was amazingly simple. If you haven't guessed it yet, I really like this. Here it is.

The Magic Hour and a Half

Spend the first one and a half hours of your day working on strategic projects. That's it. Simple isn't it?

Working on strategic projects for the first hour and a half of your day gives you the remaining seven or eight hours to deal with customer issues, fight fires, deal with interruptions, work on all the administrative stuff, and even get to your email. I'm not talking about a big time commitment. It's only an hour and a half. But the payoff you'll get from that short time investment is substantial.

This is where the 80/20 rule — commonly referred to as the Pareto Principle — really kicks in. In the 20 percent of your day that you work on strategic projects, you end up getting more done than in the remaining 80 percent.

The bonus is that these projects are completed faster and with less stress than by the alternative approach. The alternative is working on a strategic project when you can get around to it. The problem is that since these projects rarely have a deadline, we simply never get around to them — until they become a crisis, that is. That's when we start wasting resources. So, even with a mere hour-and-a-half com-

mitment to strategic projects, our productivity is enhanced several-fold. The key is to start with the strategic projects at the beginning of your day.

The Fresh Start

That's why I suggest to those managers who need to find some quiet time that, rather than staying at work past 6 p.m., you'd be much better off coming in at 6 a.m. (or working in your home office at that time.) For most people with families and partners, your loved ones may not miss you much at 6 a.m. They do miss you (hopefully) if you're still working at 6 p.m.

To those managers who lament that they're not really a morning person, I have these words of advice: Get over it!

The truth is that the human body is wonderfully adaptive. After 21 days of rising early and tackling the strategic stuff, you will find that you automatically start waking up early with more energy and focus. I've never considered myself to be a morning person, yet after just a few days of getting to my desk at 6 a.m., I've found that it's eventually become second nature.

The key is to ignore your email, phone messages, straightening your desk, and all the other urgent stuff until after that first hour and a half of project work. If you have an intranet calendar where other people can schedule meetings for you, make sure to get there first and block off that part of the working day.

Oh, What a Feeling

Once you develop the habit of working on strategic projects first, you will immediately notice the wonderful way it feels. You'll gain a sense of genuine accomplishment. You'll feel more in control. You'll find that you give yourself permission to go home at a reasonable hour, guilt-free. You'll identify yourself less as a clerk or even as a manager. Instead you'll begin to get a better sense of yourself as a leader. And, when you work on the right projects — your customers will view your company as being the industry service icon. That's market differentiation you can take to the bank. 