

Executive Briefing

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The Importance of Deciding What's Important

One busy executive says she waits until the end of each day to return phone calls that she has missed. Answering phone calls is important, but not the task of greatest importance to her. By waiting until the end of the day, she discovered that many of the problems presented in the phone calls had taken care of themselves.

Her example offers a simple lesson in setting priorities, which is one thing great leaders do. Priorities do not have to be on a par with discovering a cure for a deadly disease, or working out a world peace agreement. They must only be of sufficient importance in order to clear a path for the executive to get his job done.

Let me give you some examples.

Wayne Gretzky, the well-known Canadian hockey player, remembers his father, Walter,

setting big priorities for his son's hockey career when his son was still quite young. Wayne's mother, Phyllis, wanted new curtains for the house. Wayne recalls his father telling her, "We can put up some sheets. Wayne needs new skates."

Athletes, especially, must set priorities -- for training, for staying in shape, for focus. An example that illustrates the focus of Lance Armstrong, who has won the Tour de France multiple times and overcome cancer in the process, concerns one of his rides several years ago. He was in Spain, speeding along on his bicycle, eating a PowerBar, when he suddenly came upon a group of cyclists stopped in the path. Armstrong could have avoided a collision if he'd tossed away the PowerBar. However, his hunger overpowered him, and he refused to throw it aside. He ended up ramming into the

back of the group. As he lay sprawled on the ground, he noticed the PowerBar within reach. He grabbed it and finished eating. Feeding his hunger was his priority.

Writers often exercise great focus to ensure they finish a project. Robert Louis Stevenson, the famous short story writer, told members of his household not to interrupt him while he worked on one of his projects, even if the house caught on fire. The project that so engrossed him was "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," a classic story from the 1800s that remains popular today.

What priorities will you set today?

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