



Guide to Clear (Strategic) Priorities

A Practical Guide for Leadership Teams Looking for Sharper Focus

Most leadership teams have priorities. The important question is whether those priorities are clear enough, few enough, and meaningful enough to guide decisions, resource allocation, and execution.

Many organizations describe their strategy through a long list of goals, initiatives, projects, and commitments. Each may be worthwhile. Each may have a strong internal sponsor. Each may respond to a real business need.

But when too many things are labelled “priority,” leaders and teams are left to make their own decisions about what matters most.

That is where execution begins to weaken.

The purpose of this guide is to help leadership teams assess whether their priorities are truly clear, or whether the organization is trying to execute too many things at once.

■ *Why Priority Clarity Matters*

Priorities are not just labels.

They are choices about where leadership attention, organizational capacity, resources, and effort should be concentrated.

Clear priorities help an organization:

- Focus attention on what matters most
- Make better decisions about time, resources, and trade-offs
- Eliminate initiative overload
- Align functional plans
- Communicate direction more consistently
- Protect strategic work from being displaced by day-to-day pressures



Unclear priorities create the opposite effect.

They allow everything to remain important. They make it harder to say no. They encourage functions and departments to interpret strategy in their own way. They increase the risk that people will be busy, committed, and well-intentioned, but not necessarily focused on the same outcomes.

Priority clarity is one of the simplest and most important tests of whether a strategy is likely to be executed with discipline.

■ *How to Use This Guide*

Use the statements below to assess the clarity of your current strategic priorities.

For each statement, choose the response that best reflects your current reality.

- ✓ **Consistently True** This is clearly and consistently true across the leadership team.
- ✓ **Partly True** This is true to some extent, but not yet consistently understood or applied across the leadership team.
- ✓ **Not Yet True** This is not currently true, or it has not been addressed in a meaningful way.

The goal is not to produce a perfect score. The goal is to identify where your priorities may need to be clarified, sharpened, reduced, or translated more fully into action.

Pay particular attention to statements where members of your leadership team have differing opinions. Different answers often reveal different interpretations of what the priorities actually mean.

1. We Have a Small Number of True Priorities

A priority is something that deserves disproportionate attention.

If everything is a priority, the organization does not really have priorities. It has a workload.

Leadership teams often struggle with this because most work has value. The issue is not whether each initiative is worthwhile. The issue is whether the organization has the capacity and discipline to pursue everything with equal intensity.



Assessment Statements

1. We have identified a small number of true strategic priorities.
2. Our priorities are few enough to be remembered and acted on.
3. We have distinguished strategic priorities from routine operational work.
4. We have avoided turning every important initiative into a priority.
5. Leaders agree on which priorities require the greatest focus.

Watch For

A strategy that includes too many goals, initiatives, pillars, themes, objectives, and workstreams.

The more priorities a team names, the less useful each one becomes as a guide to decision-making. Priority clarity requires the discipline to separate what is important from what is most important.

2. Our Priorities Are Specific Enough to Guide Decisions

A priority should help leaders decide.

If a priority is too broad, it may sound strategically important without providing enough direction. Words such as growth, innovation, efficiency, excellence, culture, customer focus, and transformation may signal intent, but they do not automatically guide action.

A clear priority defines the kind of progress the organization is trying to make.

Assessment Statements

1. Our priorities are specific enough to guide real decisions.
2. Leaders can explain what each priority means in practice.
3. Each priority points to a clear outcome or area of progress.
4. Our priorities help us decide what to do first.
5. Our priorities help us decide what not to do.

Watch For

Priorities that are expressed as broad aspirations.



Aspirational language can be useful, but it must be translated into practical meaning. Otherwise, different leaders may attach different interpretations to the same words.

3. We Understand the Trade-Offs

Priorities require trade-offs.

A leadership team has not fully clarified its priorities until it understands what those priorities require the organization to stop, delay, reduce, or deprioritize.

Without trade-offs, priorities are added to existing work rather than shaping it. That creates overload and weakens execution.

Assessment Statements

1. We understand the trade-offs implied by our priorities.
2. We have identified what we will not pursue, at least for now.
3. We have discussed what may need to stop, slow down, or receive less attention.
4. Resource decisions reflect our stated priorities.
5. Leaders are prepared to defend the trade-offs required by the priorities.

Watch For

Priorities that are added without removing or reducing anything else.

This is one of the most common causes of initiative overload. When the leadership team does not make trade-offs, the organization absorbs the burden through competing demands, stretched capacity, and inconsistent execution.

4. Our Priorities Are Understood Consistently

Priority clarity requires shared understanding.

It is not enough for the leadership team to agree on the words. Leaders need to understand the priorities in the same way and communicate them consistently across the organization.

When priorities are interpreted differently, functions and departments may optimize locally while believing they are supporting the strategy.



Assessment Statements

1. The leadership team understands the priorities in the same way.
2. Leaders can explain the priorities clearly and consistently.
3. Functional plans are aligned with the same priorities.
4. People across the organization understand what matters most.
5. We have addressed areas where priorities may be interpreted differently.

Watch For

Agreement in the room followed by different explanations afterward.

This often happens when priority statements are too general or when leaders have not discussed what the priorities mean for their own areas of responsibility.

5. Our Priorities Are Connected to Resources and Capacity

Priorities must be resourced.

If resources, time, people, attention, and leadership energy are not aligned with the priorities, execution will depend on extra effort rather than disciplined focus.

A strategy becomes more credible when the leadership team can show how its priorities are reflected in resource choices.

Assessment Statements

1. We have assessed whether we have the capacity to execute our priorities.
2. Resources are aligned with the priorities we have named.
3. Leaders understand where capacity is most constrained.
4. We have identified where additional support, funding, or sequencing may be required.
5. We review resource commitments before adding new strategic work.

Watch For

Priorities that rely on already-stretched people doing more.

This is especially risky when the same individuals or teams are assigned to multiple important initiatives. Without capacity discipline, even strong priorities may stall.



6. Our Priorities Shape Leadership Behaviour

Priorities become real through leadership behaviour.

People watch what leaders pay attention to, what they ask about, what they fund, what they tolerate, what they celebrate, and what they ignore.

If leadership behaviour does not reinforce the priorities, the organization will quickly learn that the stated priorities may not be the real priorities.

Assessment Statements

1. Leaders regularly reinforce the priorities in meetings and decisions.
2. Leaders use the priorities to guide trade-offs and resource discussions.
3. Leaders avoid sending mixed signals about what matters most.
4. Leaders hold themselves and each other accountable for the priorities.
5. Leadership behaviour is consistent with the priorities we have communicated.

Watch For

Priorities that are announced but not reinforced.

A launch message or planning document is not enough. Priorities need to show up repeatedly in the behaviour and routines of the leadership team.

■ *Interpreting Your Results*

After completing the assessment, look for patterns.

Mostly Consistently True Responses

Your priorities appear to be clear, focused, and capable of guiding execution.

The opportunity is to maintain discipline, especially when new opportunities, pressures, or urgent issues compete for attention.

Many Partly True Responses

Your priorities may be directionally sound but not yet clear enough to guide consistent action.

This usually means the leadership team needs to sharpen the wording, reduce the number of priorities, clarify trade-offs, align resources, or communicate more consistently.

Several Not Yet True Responses

Your organization may be at risk of initiative overload, inconsistent execution, or strategic drift.

Before moving forward, the leadership team should revisit the priorities and make clearer choices about what matters most, what can realistically be executed, and what must be stopped, delayed, or reduced.

■ *Common Priority Clarity Gaps*

Leadership teams often discover that their priorities are less clear than they assumed.

Common gaps include:

- Too many priorities competing for attention
- Priorities expressed as broad aspirations
- No clear distinction between strategic and operational work
- Unclear trade-offs
- Resources that do not match stated priorities
- Functional plans that interpret priorities differently
- Limited discussion of what to stop doing
- Leadership behaviour that does not consistently reinforce the priorities
- New work added without revisiting existing commitments
- Priorities that are communicated once but not embedded into leadership routines

These gaps do not mean the strategy is weak. They mean the leadership team needs to strengthen its focus before execution can become consistent.



■ *Questions Every Leadership Team Should Answer*

Before asking the organization to execute the strategy, the leadership team should be able to answer:

- What are our true strategic priorities?
- Why these priorities, and why now?
- What do these priorities mean in practical terms?
- What trade-offs are required?
- What are we not going to do?
- Where are resources and capacity most constrained?
- How will we keep these priorities visible?
- How will we prevent new work from diluting focus?

If the team cannot answer these questions clearly, the priorities are probably not yet clear enough to guide execution.

■ *Final Thought*

Priority clarity is not about creating a better list.

It is about making real choices.

A leadership team has clear priorities when leaders know what matters most, understand the trade-offs, align resources and behaviour, and use the priorities to guide decisions under pressure.

Without that discipline, priorities remain words on a page.

With it, they become a practical basis for execution.