

Strategic Support Functions in Crisis Mode:

How to Prioritize Your To-Do List



What is clear to me, now more than ever, is that when something is truly a priority, it usually gets done. Over the past several weeks, my business partner and I prioritized our own operations and planned for Stanton Blackwell's post-crisis future.

We help companies and non-profit organizations solve their most stubborn operational problems. We frequently work closely with the strategic support functions, technology, finance, and human resources, teams that run the processes enabling the business to operate.

We're finding that a lot of our clients, especially support function leaders, are trying to get that same clarity. Many are asking: **How do we prioritize and then actually execute the many millions of things we could be doing?**

Short answer: *"Deciding what not to do is as important as deciding what to do."*

That's from my favorite business book, Walter Isaacson's biography of Steve Jobs. I love the simplicity of Job's thinking and his ability to visualize the future. With that in mind, I've come up with **a strategy for support functions to prioritize and execute in a crisis:**

1. Live the priorities of the business.

Please hear me out: support functions only exist because the business exists, so customer-facing operations are the priority.

That does not mean I'm arguing, at all, that your strategic support function isn't essential. I am arguing, however, that you need to engage the operations team to make sure you are supporting their goals. After all, customers only care that they can buy the thing you sell or get the service you offer. They typically don't care how you close your books every quarter, no matter how important it is to keep the business in business.

So, that means strategic support functions should be prioritizing the tasks that directly support operations. Clarify what the CEO and business unit leaders are most focused on. Are they worried about cash flow? Is it increasing revenue? Reducing expenses? Building new or maintaining existing customer relationships? Managing vendors?

What's keeping them up at night? And how can you help? Simplify what the business needs to survive the crisis (or to thrive in the rapid expansion certain sectors are seeing right now).

2. Grade your function on alignment with the business priorities.

Now that you know what the operations team needs, evaluate how you are meeting those needs.

Is your team "supporting" the business objectives, or is your team internally focused on the comfort zone tasks? Don't beat yourself up if it is latter. It's natural for people to overprioritize routine or time-sensitive tasks, even when less urgent projects offer greater rewards. We are all guilty of confusing activity with impact from time to time.

It will help if you also validate your own team's perception with external feedback. Ask your executive partners if they are getting the support they need from you, what is missing? Realize they may have no experience with what you do as a strategic support function and may not have good answers but will appreciate that you asked.

3. Understand the urgent and focus on the important

Now that you know the organization's goals and how your team is meeting them, you can get to work. Start to think of tasks and projects by their (actual) urgency and importance. Keep in mind that many important projects that weren't so urgent before the crisis have now become very urgent. Three months ago, many HR organizations believed that employee onboarding was an important project. Now that it must be executed virtually from start to finish, it is urgent.

My suggestion to use urgency and importance makes more sense when I explain that I'm a big fan of the [Eisenhower prioritization matrix](#). It divides tasks into four quadrants:

- Urgent + Important (to be completed immediately)
- Not Urgent + Important (to be scheduled on your calendar)
- Urgent + Unimportant (to be delegated to someone else)
- Not Urgent + Unimportant (to be deleted)

Stealing from Steve Covey who is referenced in the linked article above:

- **Urgent matters are those that require immediate action.**
- **Important matters, on the other hand, are those that contribute to long-term goals.**

By thinking about your urgent and important deliverables this way, you can find a place to put the urgent, so that you can focus on the important. Do it for all your to-dos today, this week, this month, this quarter, and this year. It'll keep you sane in crisis-mode, but also when things turn around.

Let me know what you think of this approach. Have you tried this prioritization matrix? Any other tips you'd like to share? Also, feel free to reach out with questions or to talk through your pressing challenges.

P.S. Economic inequality and institutionalized racism in our country are problems for which a solution has moved from important to urgent in our country. I can only hope that we, especially white Americans, make them a priority.

Give us a call at (703) 254-7071 or send us an email at info@stantonblackwell.com. We are interested in learning more about your vision.



Contributor: Anne Gehring

Anne Gehring is a Founding Partner of Stanton Blackwell. Throughout her career, Anne has led teams to solve complex problems through collaboration and structured execution. She has a passion for people development and has been a strong advocate for talent diversity since her career began over thirty years ago.

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