For any plan, initiative, or strategy to be successful, every leadership team must have a set of clear priorities in place to guide the actions of the business. This process is probably the single most important thing the team does, as it will set the foundation and direction for the rest of the business to follow. The problem is that most leadership teams are not very good at this. In fact, a recent survey found that 64% of executives say that they have too many conflicting priorities. Having a plan and aligned priorities that support the growth agenda for the business creates a common view of the goal and the path to reaching it. It ensures people are aligned and informed throughout the process. Here are six things you should keep in mind when setting priorities for your business.
1. Alignment means having a clear picture.

Often times there are varying opinions of what strategy is the right one at a given time, how to execute against it, and who should be doing what and when. While it’s good to have an organization that is thoughtful and repeats the words of a strategy, it is a significant difference to know what it means. For example, the organization may agree that they need to enter a new market. Everyone nods their head: yes, that’s what we need to do. But they may not have discussed exactly what that looks like or what steps each group or function needs to take to help the organization achieve the goal. Without alignment on what the challenge is and how to solve it, there is no alignment on priorities or what defines success. It turns out that there is a big difference between knowing the name of something like a strategy and how it actually works.

What to do

Begin any strategic process by getting everyone on the same page – defining your guiding light, your “north star.” Be open to pushback, hear what other stakeholders think, and work together to create the vision that best supports your company. Once alignment around the direction of the organization is in place, the rest becomes much easier.

2. Prioritize what will propel you forward.

Many people like to throw their hats in the ring when it comes to setting priorities. By definition, not everything will make the list. Some actions will end up being seen as more important than others, and some will fall to the back burner indefinitely. People become invested in the priorities they or their departments will ultimately be held accountable to deliver. Sometimes this causes people to be a little myopic – losing sight of the bigger picture, the overall goal that priorities have been put in place to achieve. The priority setting is a challenging one. Most organizations start with 12 priorities and cut the list down to 22. The reason simply is that leadership teams never achieve the goal on the first effort because no one wants their priority to land on the cutting room floor. The only way around this is that all team members must “own the whole” before their piece and focus on what is mission-critical for the whole enterprise.

What to do:

Make sure the owners of low or omitted priorities understand the logic behind the decision – the why. Take time to help everyone involved understand the big picture goal and how they are going to help achieve it (whether their specific priorities made the list or not) so they can feel connected to what’s most important.
3. Create the right pace and sequence for the future.

Not all priorities are created equal. It can be challenging to strike the right balance of what’s important and what each priority will deliver for the business. Especially when you’re at close range with strategy development and priority setting, the view can be blurry. The right balance is a combination of two critical factors. The first is the pace and sequence of priorities so that they are digestible by the organization. The second is knowing how to balance the near-term and long-term priorities.

What to do:
Step back and take a hard look at your priorities to understand what purpose each serves. Think about creating a healthy balance of priorities across these three buckets for true success:

— Run your business better today – this includes critical improvements on the base business.
— Build capability for tomorrow’s business – this involves expense that is paid for by running the business better today.
— Growth bets for the future – these are the revenue growth avenues that show near, mid, and long-term growth projections.

4. Communicate so priorities resonate.

Many leaders make the mistake of revealing strategies and priorities in language that may work in the boardroom, but doesn’t resonate with the troops. If people can’t relate their jobs to what you’re saying the company needs, or what they can do to help, they will automatically disconnect. Continue to ask your people if they “understand what it looks like” that they should be doing differently. If the answer is a puzzled expression of uncertainty, you must step in with clear and succinct examples of what it means to them in their roles.

What to do:
Make your managers the meaning-makers. They have the power to link their teams to company priorities in a realistic and meaningful way. Arm them to translate strategic business-speak into the language of the people doing work around them – making priorities accessible and understandable in the context of daily work activities. Also, continue to tell stories and use examples of individuals who are executing in new ways against the priorities.
5. Set in process milestones.

Some people understand the rhetoric behind priorities, but give up when the desired end result isn’t achieved right away. It is vital to set “in-process” milestones so that people can see if they are on track or off track, and can take corrective action if needed.

What to do:
Talk about what success looks like to you. Communicate to reinforce the belief in your collective ability to achieve the goal with in-process milestones and metrics. This gives everyone a dynamic barometer that shows people where you are, where you’re going, and how long it will take to get there. Communicate in practical terms, use vivid examples, and praise people who actively contribute to accomplishing a priority so others can model their behavior.

6. Celebrate early wins and rapidly scale to other areas.

Regardless of how hard you try, many people still sit back and wait for someone else to go first in creating new mission-critical priorities. It is essential to create momentum and even a movement by celebrating early successes and scaling the drivers of this success to other areas.

What to do:
Establish a mindset of challenging the status quo, running a rapid experiment, and capturing the learnings of successes or failure as the way to accelerate new action for priority execution.

All good business people know that any process related to executing a strategy around set priorities comes with challenges. Once you know what the challenges are, you can effectively plan to take each one of them down. Breaking down barriers will give your people confidence and build their enthusiasm – as long as you stick to the priorities you set forth. Remember your guiding light, the reason for doing what you’re doing, and check yourself along the way. With alignment, priorities that speak to all involved, and a vision for success, you can reach your goal.