

Ethically Speaking



Randy L. Haupt
Colorado School of Mines
Brown Building 249
1510 Illinois Street, Golden,
CO 80401 USA
Tel: +1 (303) 273 3721
E-mail: rhaupt@mines.edu



Amy J. Shockley
E-mail: aj4317@gmail.com

Reprioritization

About 25 years ago, my good friend Tim and I decided to cross-country ski to a cabin in the Colorado mountain backcountry. The cabin was located at about 3500 m above sea level, and was far from any roads. Tim was in charge of the United States “hot shot” crew that fought forest fires in Colorado, so he spent a lot of time outdoors in the wilderness, and was skilled at survival. I had just retired as the US Air Force Academy Nordic ski coach, and had gone through survival training a number of years earlier. The sun was shining and the snow was deep when we started out. We had a great time skiing and snowshoeing. We spent two days away from civilization, during which time the top priorities were to have fun, enjoy the outdoors, and get some challenging exercise. Worries such as our daughters will someday become teenagers were long forgotten.

On our last day, we woke up and went outside. Oh no! There were thick clouds on the horizon and the weather was changing fast. We scrambled to pack our things, strap into our skis, and took off down the mountain. The sun was brightly shining when we began, but the storm moved faster than us, and in a matter of minutes, we could no longer see each other in the whiteout. Our trip went from a fun experience to one of sheer terror, and taxed our Nordic skiing and survival skills. Over the course of a couple of minutes, our priorities abruptly changed. We no longer cared about exercise or the scenery, and instead focused on getting back to civilization and containing our panic. The storm effectively disrupted our plans and imposed new priorities. I'll spare you all of the details (although Tim did complete a 360° spinout over a small cliff before getting buried in a snow bank), but the story ends with us finding my car and stopping at our favorite pizza restaurant for a good, hearty meal before getting home.

Evaluating your bandwidth and then prioritizing your competing tasks in alignment with your ethics works most of the time. Start the week by evaluating tasks for the upcoming week, and through effective prioritization and capacity planning, define the timeline to get everything done. However, what happens if you become ill, or if your boss assigns you a new urgent project, or if a family member or friend needs help that requires a significant amount of your time? We do not live in a static world. It is ever-changing and evolving, and you can experience events that disrupt your plans, which requires yet one more skill in effective prioritization: reprioritization. Just think about how your priorities changed as the COVID-19 virus spread. We were unprepared and panic took over.

New information, opportunities, and trials intrude into our plans before we have fully processed the existing information and completed the current opportunities and challenges at hand. Adapting our tactics and evolving our schedule to accommodate changes provides a way to get through both mundane and challenging events. Taking a fluid approach to prioritization sounds overwhelming, and at times it can be. However, the fittest or best prepared are able to adapt to disruptions, and ultimately, to succeed.

Reprioritization requires the same ethics-based methodology used for prioritization. Simply evaluate how new tasks and events fit into the importance-urgency matrix, as well as how they compare to the previously identified items. Aligning your actions with your moral compass will then provide you the tools needed to discuss how you have reprioritized your time and efforts with stakeholders. Those impacted may be disappointed; however, as long as the decision aligns with the right allocation of your bandwidth, you can effectively manage any fallout by discussing your decision process.

Reprioritization requires a shift in mindset. Avoid getting upset or frustrated by new tasks and the need to deprioritize previously prioritized items. Instead, approach the new challenges with curiosity. Curiosity leads to knowledge about the disruptor that in turn leads to effective decision making. An openness to change and a logical approach to reprioritization counters the disruptor's solicitation of an emotional response. Harnessing that emotional response, and instead learning about the disruptor and its overall impact, can often be empowering. However, also understanding what lies within your control and what lies beyond your control helps to reevaluate priorities.

In 1991, the IEEE AP-S Symposium was in Ontario, Canada. I had my plane tickets, registration, and hotel. The day before I was to leave, a water pipe in our house burst and flooded our first floor. I wisely cancelled my trip and paper presentation, even though I was looking forward to the event. While the trip had been fully planned and had clear professional benefits, it was still within my control and I was empowered to decide whether I would attend. The water pipe was out of my control. While getting upset would be an understandable response, instead accepting the disruptive event, its impact, and the fact that it required my immediate and full attention was necessary in effectively reprioritizing my time for that week.

Learning about new items as they arise, evaluating what is in your control, and constantly reprioritizing in alignment with your moral compass will empower you to fully optimize your capacity within your bandwidth. This approach to all aspects of your life will allow you to achieve the work-life balance you desire, and will allow you to take advantage of new opportunities as they arise.

It will also make you better prepared for challenges that arise, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. People and organizations were forced to reprioritize public health above all else. How did you and your organizations react to this disruptor? You are likely able to identify those who sought information, accepted the impact of the situation, and made defensible decisions, versus those who became overwhelmed with the need to adjust.

Last summer, my wife and I met Tim and his wife in Leadville, Colorado (population 2,762 at 3,094 m above sea level). We went for pizza at an eclectic restaurant, and reminisced about our great times together, including our ski trip. Tim was diagnosed with colon cancer in 1998, after we had both moved away from the community in which we became friends. We stayed in touch, and he is now cancer free, having even climbed up Mt. Kilimanjaro a few years ago. I remember that devastating news about his cancer diagnosis and his fight to survive. Tim has a strong moral compass and successfully reprioritized his life.

As we were strolling through downtown Leadville, my phone rang. It was my doctor. My colon-cancer test was positive. Now what? I was happy to have my wife, Tim, and his wife present when I got the news. I did not let that news ruin our time together – a higher priority right then. However, I started doing research immediately afterwards. How do I reprioritize my life now? I've been diabetic for 38 years: do I have the bandwidth to handle this new news? I knew that I must maintain my moral compass as I made plans to deal with an important disruptive priority that had suddenly appeared. Fortunately, there is a happy ending: the test was a false positive! No need to reprioritize – or is there?