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## **ARTICLE** **PRODUCTIVITY**

# How to Prioritize Your Work When Your Manager Doesn't

*by Amy Jen Su*

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# How to Prioritize Your Work When Your Manager Doesn't

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Prioritizing work can be frustrating, especially if you work for a hands-off manager or a company that doesn't give you clear goals. Most of us face this reality each and every day. The frequently cited research of Robert Kaplan and David Norton shows that more than 90% of employees don't fully understand their company's strategy or know what's expected of them to help achieve company goals. Compounding the problem, [recent research](#) shows that global executives say they have too

many conflicting priorities. In a world where conflicting and unclear priorities are the norm, how can you learn to prioritize your own work and still feel satisfaction from a job well done?

### **Take Ownership**

First, check your mindset when it comes to setting priorities. Don't assume that prioritizing your workload is someone else's job, and don't choose to see yourself solely as a "do-er" or a "worker bee." It's easy to point blame at our managers and organizations when we experience high levels of stress or an overwhelming amount of work. Recognize that consciously setting priorities is a key pillar of success. You can start by [assessing how well you're handling the increased workload](#) that comes with being a leader today.

### **Filter Priorities**

Select a couple of areas to set priorities in; this can help the brain to manage information overload. [Researchers have found](#) that it's the overload of options that paralyze us or lead to decisions that go against our best interests. Two criteria I use with clients to filter for priorities include contribution and passion. Consider your role today and answer the following questions:

- **What is my highest contribution?** When we reflect on contribution, we consider both the organization's needs and how we uniquely bring to bear strengths, experience, and capabilities. The word *contribution* captures a sense of purpose, citizenship, and service.
- **What am I passionate about?** Motivation and energy fuel action, so when setting priorities, get clear on what brings you inspiration in your work today.

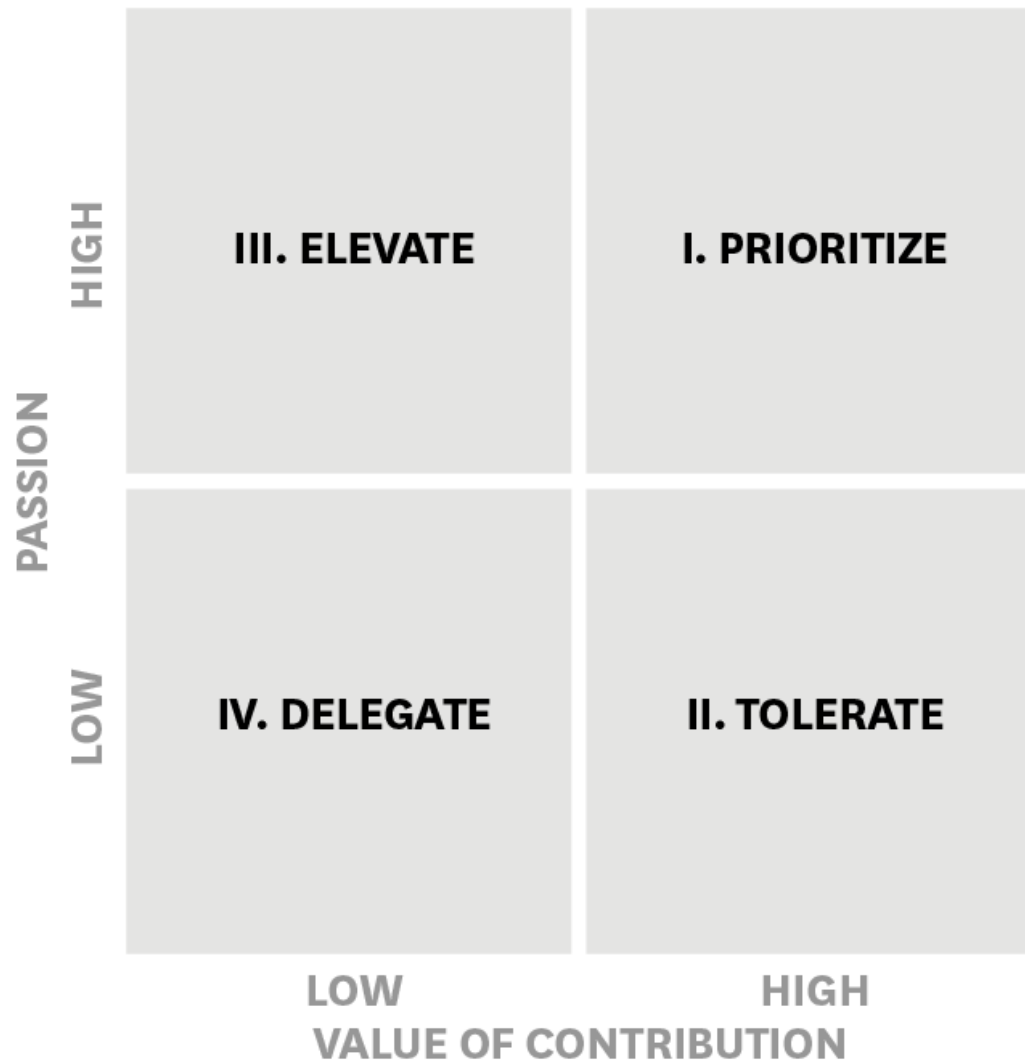
### **Determine Next Steps with an Organizing Framework**

We can put the two criteria of contribution and passion together to create an organizing framework. The framework can help you to sort priorities and define subsequent actions. Consider this chart:

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# Which Tasks Should You Prioritize?

Focus on those that align your passion with where you can contribute most. Tolerate, elevate, and delegate the rest.



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**Quadrant I: Prioritize** those areas of your job that hit this sweet-spot intersection of bringing your highest value-add and making an impact that you feel excited about. Look at the answers to the two

questions above and see which projects, initiatives, and activities show up on both your high contribution and high passion lists.

**Quadrant II: Tolerate** those parts of the role that are important but drain your energy when you're engaging in them. What are the possible discomforts, and what can you do about them?

- Tolerate and accept that you aren't going to love every part of the job. For example, you may be excited about having a larger role and team but less excited about the increase in managerial processes and administration that come with it.
- Tolerate the fact that you may be on a learning curve. Perhaps a key part of the job includes something that isn't yet a strength, such as presenting at town hall meetings or being more visible externally. [Keep a growth mindset](#) and push yourself out of the comfort zone.
- Remember that there is a tipping point in this quadrant. For example, your highest contribution in a strategy role may never offer you the passion you feel when coaching people. The quadrant could highlight that it's time for a change (which was my situation more than 15 years ago, when no amount of prioritizing was ever going to overcome the fact I was in the wrong career).

**Quadrant III: Elevate** those tasks that give you a lot of energy but that others don't see as the best use of your time. Where are the possible points of elevation?

- Elevate the value-add. Perhaps you see a hot new area, but the impact is less clear to others. Share what you are seeing out on the horizon that fuels your conviction, and explain why it's good not only for you but also for the company.
- Elevate yourself. Be mindful of areas that you still enjoy, perhaps from a previous role or from when the company was smaller. Maybe you love to fix problems and have a bias toward action, which leads you to get involved in things your team should be handling. Hit pause before diving in.
- Ultimately, if the disconnect grows between what keeps you motivated and what your organization values, it may be time to move on.

**Quadrant IV: Delegate** the daily churn of low-value and low-energy-producing activities, emails, and meetings. If there's no one to delegate to, make the case for hiring someone. You can also just say no, or eliminate those tasks altogether. The irony is, as we progress in our careers, things that were once in quadrant I now belong in quadrant IV. If people still come to you for these tasks, redirect them graciously by saying something like, "It's so great to see you. I know how important this is. I've asked Kate on my team to take on those issues, and she'll be able to get you a more direct and speedy answer."

### **Operationalize and Flag Priorities in Your Calendar**

Look back on your calendar over the last month to see how much time you allocated across the four quadrants. I personally use a color-coding system in my calendar to quickly and visually see how I'm doing. (QI = yellow, QII = purple, QIII = blue, QIV = no color). At the start of a week, flag all QI priorities and give yourself a little extra preparation time on them.

Don't settle for the status quo. As Greg McKeown, the author of *Essentialism* shares, [if you don't prioritize your time, someone else will](#). And it won't always be with your best interests or the greater good in mind. So take ownership and reclaim decision-making power over where you can best spend your time and energy. By doing so, you set yourself on a trajectory to produce meaningful results, experience more job satisfaction, and have increased energy.

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