# Focus

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## From Long Lists to Short Lists

We Americans love our lists.  We use to-do lists, grocery lists, gift lists – the list (*ahem*) is endless.  But lists have significant shortcomings when used to manage our most precious resource: time.

Good leaders follow guiding principles of transparency and simplicity to overcome the inherent weaknesses of lists, even as people constantly create new lists that grow throughout the organization.  Before describing how a leader keeps lists pruned, let's take a quick look at the problems with using lists as a management tool.

**First, lists typically lack a logical action sequence.**  The list begins simply enough, with one or a few items, but then grows as more items are added in the order they occur to us.  The grocery shopping list many people post on their refrigerator is a prime example of a random list.  As foods are depleted, that item is added to the list.  However, following the sequence of this random list to fill your cart at the market is an inefficient plan.

**Second, lists do not account for task complexity** and resources and time needed to carry out the desired activity.  Returning to the grocery store analogy, imagine shopping for a special dinner party featuring a crown pork roast.  More time and money is devoted to choosing and having the butcher prepare the roast than selecting a bag of chips.  Moreover, if the shopper is both time- and money-limited, then the pork should be selected early in the shopping trip.  This saves time (the butcher can work on the roast while you continue shopping) and you can adjust spending for non-essential items to stay within budget.

**Third, lists fail to account for priorities**.  Thus lacking focus, long business to-do lists (or "action plans") seldom produce the desired results.

A good leader can fix these shortcomings by helping followers stay on track and on task.  Staying on track involves vision and pathfinding; here's how to do that.

**"The first task of a leader is to define reality,"** wrote Max De Pree in his book *Leadership is an Art*.  This means clarifying the current situation and defining the resources available to address opportunities and threats.  The organization's leader has a unique advantage followers lack: perspective from the top.  This perspective enables the leader to fashion a clear set of priorities – just two or three – that keep followers focused on the main thing.

After the path is clear, **the leader helps people stay on task** and work as effective teams.  The best-performing teams are led by leaders who relentlessly simplify complexity.  Simplification begins with brevity.

Short lists are better.  People cannot remember long lists anyway, and they dilute effort across too many priorities.  With a laser-like focus on top goals, the leader enables followers to reduce their action lists to a manageable size.

Reducing a long list to a short one begins with prioritizing the desired outcomes.  Priorities are driven by strategic importance, urgency, resource and capability constraints, sequence requirements, and return on investment.  As situations change, priorities may also change, but knowing the priorities makes lists easier to remember and manage.

Finally, avoid the trap of having too many to-do lists because the mental gymnastics needed to manage multiple lists eventually causes fatigue and frustration.  It's fine to have separate to-do lists for work and home *if* you're **not**:

- Too busy,
- Have many responsibilities, or
- Frequently run out of time for the important things.

Otherwise, keep all your really important priorities on one list.

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