PRIORITIZATION HEURISTICS

OPTIONALITY

When facing complexity...What can I do today that will give me more options in the future when I'll know more?

SUSTAINABLE SYSTEMS

What items will most serve longer-term sustainability for me, my team, larger systems I'm a part of? What task would make future tasks unnecessary?

BATCHING

Some small things aren't worth the task switching overhead, or don't deliver enough value on their own to make it to the top of a backlog, but can have positive results when batched so you can focus on several in succession.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Sometimes, an item is important not because it's important to you but because it's important to someone else—and that relationship is important to you.

EXPLOIT THE CONSTRAINT

When your tasks (individually) or features (as a team) are part of something larger and the overall result is limited by your capacity...What's the thing you're uniquely able to do? What can you delegate?

SIMPLE ROI

If the item is relatively straightforward, predictable, and analyzable, calculate cost and benefit. What's the return on each item? What's the investment on each item. Which one has the biggest ROI?

WITHIN HIERARCHICAL LEVELS

prioritized, within each feature user stories get

prioritized, etc. This seems obvious, but it has

the advantage of keeping the total list of items

small at each layer in the hierarchy. You're not

prioritizing 100 stories; you're prioritizing, say,

8 within a feature.

Company strategy sets which features get

COST OF DELAY

Add the time dimension when you're thinking about ROI. Is this a really important thing that's not valuable until some future date? Is it less a important thing overall but will have immediate benefit?

MAXIMIZE LEVERAGE

What item will have disproportionate results? Is there something we could do first that would make other things on the list easier or unnecessary? "The lead domino".



BROADER SYSTEMS

VALUE/ECONOMICS

TWO MINUTE RULE

important thing overall but will have immediate benefit?



ANTI-TYRANNY OF THE URGENT

Add the time dimension when you're thinking about ROI. Is this a really important thing that's not valuable until some future date? Is it less a

CATEGORIES

URGENT VS IMPORTANT

It's easy to confuse these. What things are at the top of my list just because they have a close deadline or squeaky wheel? What are they crowding out that's more important? Check out the "Eisenhower Matrix" for a nice visualization tool here.

PAIRWISE

Given a large list of options, select two and choose the higher priority. Take that and compare it with a third item from the list. Repeat to sort the full list. See Luke Hohmann's "20/20 Vision" Innovation Game, which uses the analogy of an optomestrist compairing two possible lens strengths, and asking "better 1 or better 2... 2 or 1...", then swapping the options to narrow it down

COMPARISON



EMOTION AS INFO

The things you're particularly drawn to might be important and purposeful. Or they might just be fun. Treat your excitement as data and get curious about it. Ask others to help you see where you might be overally optimistic or have a blind spot you're ignoring.

EXCITEMENT AS DATA

RESISTENCE AS DATA

Your internal resistance is also a source of info. You might be procrastinating on something because it really is low value and you just feel obligated to do it. Or you might be procrastinating because it's really important and there's a lot at stake. Treat the resistance as data and get curious about it.

ELIMINATE THE BOTTOM

If one of these was for sure not going fit, which one would I feel best about letting go of? Optionally iterate on that.

GUARANTEE ONE

Given a set of items that all appear important, ask, "If you had a magic want that could guarantee one of these, and you may or may not get the others, how would you use your guarantee?" This puts the focus on what you get rather than what you lose and reduces the loss aversion that can sometimes paralyze prioritization. I love this one with stakeholders who are reluctant to prioritize.



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PROHIBIT LAST IN FIRST OUT

A thought experiment to think through the implications of prioritizing a squeaky wheel. Ask yourself "if we do this first, what will it crowd out? What would have to fall off to accommodate By pretending the most recent additions to the list just aren't allowed to go to the top you can mitigate recency bias. You'd usually do a comparison heuristic to evaluate whether the new item really is the most important.

ROCKS VS SAND

Popularized in Steven Covey's Seven Habits book, the idea is this: you have to move some river rocks and some sand. If you put the rocks in your bucket first, you can fill the gaps with sand. But if you put the sand in first, the rocks won't fit.