Randel Consulting Associates
Leading Organizations through Change and Growth

The Priority Anchor Toolkit

Establish and Sustain Meaningful Priorities in a Volatile World

The Priority Anchor Framework

Instead of lengthy priority lists that quickly become obsolete, leaders in volatile environments need what I call "Priority Anchors"—a small number of essential commitments that remain stable even as tactics shift.

Effective Priority Anchors have three characteristics:

- **They're genuinely few.** Not seven priorities. Not even five. Two to three anchors that you can articulate in a single sentence each. If your team can't remember your priorities without looking them up, you have too many.

- **They define what you'll protect, not everything you'll do.** Your anchors aren't a comprehensive list of activities. They're the essential things you refuse to sacrifice, even under pressure. Everything else becomes negotiable.

- **They translate into decision filters, not just aspirations.** Each anchor should help you answer the question: "Given our current reality, what do we do first? What do we defer? What do we stop doing entirely?"

Discovering My Priority Anchors

A structured process to help you identify 2-3 essential commitments

Time Required: 60-90 minutes of focused, uninterrupted work
Materials Needed: Blank paper, sticky notes (or digital equivalent), quiet space

Part 1: The Brutal Inventory (10 minutes)
Purpose: Get honest about your current reality

On a blank page, quickly list everything currently competing for your attention and resources. Don't organize or filter—just brain dump. Include:

- Strategic initiatives
- Operational demands
- Stakeholder expectations
- Team needs
- External pressures
- Your own leadership development

Set a timer for 10 minutes and capture everything. If your list has fewer than 15 items, you're not being comprehensive enough.

Stop and notice: How does seeing this full list make you feel?

Part 2: The Impossible Choice Exercise (15 minutes)
Purpose: Force yourself past "everything is important" thinking

You're about to do something uncomfortable. You'll going to make a series of forced choices that will reveal what you truly value.

Round 1: The First Cut:
Look at your full list. Imagine you suddenly lost 50% of your capacity—half your time, half your budget, half your team. You can only protect half of what's on your list.
- Draw a line down the middle of a new page. On the left side, write "PROTECT." On the right side, write "DEFER/REDUCE."
- Go through each item and force yourself to choose. No middle ground. No "partially protect." Each item goes to one side or the other. This will be agonizing. Do it anyway.

Round 2: The Deeper Cut
Now look at your PROTECT list. You're going to cut it in half again.
Imagine you lost another 50% of capacity. You can only truly protect HALF of what's in your PROTECT column.
- Create a new page. Put your top priorities on it. Everything else goes to DEFER/REDUCE.

Round 3: The Core
Look at what remains. This should be 4-6 items.
Final brutal question: *If you could only protect THREE things—three commitments you refuse to sacrifice even under extreme pressure—what would they be?*
- Write those three items on sticky notes. One item per note.

Part 3: The Sacrifice Test (10 minutes)
Purpose: Verify these are true anchors, not aspirations

For each of your three items, answer these questions:
- **The Resource Test**: "If I had to choose between this and [another item from your list], which would I actually protect with my time and budget?"
  - If you say "both are equally important," you haven't found a true anchor yet. Go deeper.
- **The Pressure Test**: "When a board member/funder/key stakeholder pressures me to abandon this, will I hold firm or compromise?"
  - If the honest answer is "I'd probably compromise," it's not actually an anchor.
- **The Team Test**: "If my team had to make a difficult decision and I wasn't available, would this priority give them clear guidance about what to do?"
  - If it's too vague to guide decisions, it's not operational enough.

Action: Based on these tests, refine your three items. You may need to rewrite them or swap one out for something that better meets these criteria.

Part 4: From Topics to Anchors (15 minutes)
Purpose: Transform general priorities into operational Priority Anchors

Most leaders start with topics: "Staff development" or "Financial sustainability" or "Client services." Priority Anchors need more specificity and should be written as commitments that pass this test: "We will protect [this specific thing], even when that means sacrificing [something else]."

For each of your three items, transform it using this template:

> **Priority Anchor Template:** "We will protect _____,
> even when that means _____."

Examples:

❌ Weak: "Client services are a priority"

✓ Strong: "We will protect direct client service quality, even when that means reducing administrative functions and reporting requirements"

❌ Weak: "Staff development matters"

✓ Strong: "We will protect weekly team learning time, even when that means responding more slowly to external requests"

❌ Weak: "We need sustainable funding"

✓ Strong: "We will protect time for cultivating mission-aligned funders, even when that means saying no to short-term revenue opportunities that pull us off mission"

Your turn... Rewrite each of your three priorities as a Priority Anchor using this format.

Part 5: The Decision Filter Test (10 minutes)
Purpose: Verify your anchors actually guide choices

Priority Anchors should function as decision filters. Test each of your three anchors against real decisions you're currently facing or recently faced.

Scenario Setup: Think of a real decision you're facing where you have competing options and limited resources.

1. Based on this Priority Anchor, which option should I choose?
2. What does this Priority Anchor tell me to do first?
3. What does this Priority Anchor tell me to defer or stop?
4. If I follow this Priority Anchor, what am I explicitly choosing NOT to do?

Red Flag Check
- If your Priority Anchor doesn't clearly point toward one option over another, it's too vague. Revise it.
- If following your Priority Anchor would lead to a decision you know is wrong for your organization, you've identified the wrong anchor. Revise it.
- If you can't articulate what you'd stop doing based on this anchor, it's not operational enough. Revise it.

Part 6: The One-Sentence Test (5 minutes)
Purpose: Ensure your anchors are memorable and communicable

Each Priority Anchor should be simple enough that:

- You can say it in one sentence
- Your team can remember it without looking it up
- It's specific enough to guide decisions but flexible enough to allow tactical adaptation

Final refinement: For each of your three Priority Anchors, distill it to its essence. If you can't say it in a single, clear sentence, it's too complicated.

Write your final three Priority Anchors here:

> **Priority Anchor 1:**
>
>
> **Priority Anchor 2:**
>
>
> **Priority Anchor 3:**

Part 7: The Accountability Plan (5 minutes)
Purpose: Set yourself up to actually use these anchors

Answer these questions:

- **When will I share these Priority Anchors with my team?** (Put a specific date on your calendar)

- **How will I make these anchors visible in my daily work?**
  - Where will they be physically or digitally present?
  - How will I reference them in meetings?
  - How will I use them in my calendar/planning?

- **When will I do my first alignment check?** (Schedule it 3-4 weeks out: assess whether your time and resources are actually flowing toward these anchors)

- **Who will hold me accountable to these priorities?** (Name a specific person—peer, coach, board member—who will ask you how you're doing)

Final Reflection Question:

Looking at your three Priority Anchors, complete this sentence:

"If we successfully protect these three things over the next 6 months, the most important outcome will be _____."

If you can't answer this clearly, your anchors may not be the right ones. Go back and refine.

What Comes Next

Once you have your Priority Anchors:

- Test them for 2-3 weeks against real decisions
- Refine them based on what you learn
- Communicate them explicitly and repeatedly with your team
- Align your calendar and resources to reflect these priorities
- Check alignment regularly (monthly minimum)

Remember: Priority Anchors aren't permanent. They should be stable enough to guide you through volatile periods (3-6 months minimum) but flexible enough to evolve as conditions change.

The goal isn't to find perfect priorities. The goal is to create enough clarity that you and your team can make coherent decisions in the midst of chaos.

Facilitating a Leadership Team Engagement

Before the Exercise:

- Allow 1.5 to 2 hours for a full group process
- Emphasize this isn't about what *should* be priorities—it's about what you can actually protect given current reality
- Normalize that this process is uncomfortable; forcing choices always is

During the Exercise:

- Do Parts 1-3 in silence first, then share
- In Part 2, don't let people hedge. Force the choices.
- In Part 4, push for specificity. Vague anchors don't guide decisions.
- In Part 5, use real organizational decisions to test anchors

Common Challenges:

- *"Everything really is equally important"* → Then you'll accomplish nothing meaningful. Force the choice anyway.
- *"My board/funders won't accept these priorities"* → The question isn't what they'll accept, it's what you can actually deliver. You can negotiate expectations once you're clear about capacity.
- *"These priorities might change in 3 months"* → That's fine. Anchors can evolve. But you need clarity for the next 3-6 months to function effectively.
- *"My team has different priorities than what emerged for me"* → That's valuable information. Facilitate this exercise with your team and find the overlaps.

Sustaining Anchor Priorities With Your Team

Communicate Priorities to Overwhelmed Teams

Once you've identified your Priority Anchors, the real work begins: helping your exhausted team understand and commit to them.

Your team doesn't need you to pretend everything is fine. They need you to be honest about the constraints you're facing while being clear about where their efforts matter most. They need to hear you say: "Yes, we're under tremendous pressure. And here's what we're going to protect no matter what."

Effective priority communication isn't a single announcement. It's a continuous conversation where you:

- **Name what you're choosing and what you're not choosing.** "We're prioritizing X, which means we're deliberately not doing Y right now." This explicit trade-off helps your team understand you're making intentional choices, not just reacting.
- **Connect priorities to specific decisions and actions**. "Because maintaining client service is our anchor, we're going to Y instead of Z this week." Show them how the priorities translate into actual choices.
- **Acknowledge when you're being forced to compromise.** "I know this isn't ideal. Given our current constraints, here's why this is the right focus for now." Your team can handle difficult truth; what they can't handle is confusion about why they're being asked to sacrifice.

Show Up With Alignment

Here's the truth: Your team watches what you actually do more than they listen to what you say. If you declare that staff development is a priority and then cancel every coaching session because "something came up," you've told them everything they need to know about your real priorities.

Leadership alignment means your calendar, your attention in meetings, your questions, and your resource allocation all reinforce your stated priorities. This doesn't mean everything else disappears—there will always be urgent matters demanding attention. But it means the pattern of your leadership consistently points toward what matters most.

Some practical ways to maintain alignment:

- **Protect calendar time for priority work**. If developing sustainable funding is a priority, block time for funder cultivation. If staff resilience is a priority, block time for team connection. Let other things flex around these protected commitments.
- **Make your priorities visible in team meetings.** Start meetings by naming how today's agenda connects to your Priority Anchors. End meetings by asking: "How did what we just discussed advance our priorities?"
- **Catch yourself and correct course publicly.** When you realize you've gotten pulled away from priorities, say so: "I've been spending too much time on X when our priority is Y. Here's how I'm adjusting." This models the behavior you want from your team.

Invite Commitment and Accountability

The most effective priorities aren't dictated from the top; they're co-owned by the team. When your people have a voice in shaping how priorities get implemented, they're more likely to stay committed when the going gets rough.

This doesn't mean priorities are established by committee or that everything is negotiable. It means once you've defined your Priority Anchors, you bring your team into the conversation about implementation:

Given these priorities and our current capacity, what needs to happen first?

What can we defer?

Where do you need support?

Create structures that keep priorities present without adding bureaucracy. Some teams have a brief weekly priority check: "What did each of us do this week that advanced our priorities? Where did we get pulled off course?" This isn't about judgment—it's about maintaining collective attention on what matters.

And perhaps most importantly: **give your team permission to use the priorities as a shield.** When someone asks them to take on something that doesn't align with your anchors, they should be able to say: "That sounds valuable, but it's not one of our current priorities. Let me connect you with [leader] to discuss whether this should shift our focus."

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Taking Root

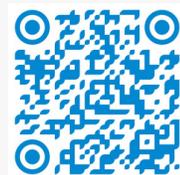Assessing Your Readiness for Leading Change and Growth

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