

Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

My Boss Changes Priorities Faster Than I Switch Tabs

How to Work Through Constant Changes in Direction,
Confirm Decisions, and Protect Your Time Without
Creating Five Versions of the Same Task



**We've got a problem. But relax.
It can be solved—and we'll even have something to laugh about.**

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INTRO

At 2:17 on a perfectly ordinary Tuesday, your boss announces that the customer onboarding project is now the company's top priority. This is excellent news because you've been working on it for three weeks, and a little management attention might finally help you get the necessary approvals. At 2:43, your boss forwards an email from a major client and asks everyone to focus on a revised pricing proposal instead. At 3:26, the marketing director wants an urgent update on the onboarding project. By 4:15, your boss has scheduled a meeting for tomorrow morning to discuss why the team isn't making enough progress. You stare at your computer, where seventeen tabs are open, six documents are half-finished, and one spreadsheet has been renamed so many times that its filename now resembles a distress signal. Somewhere in the building, someone is probably preparing a presentation about improving organizational efficiency.

The strange thing is that you haven't been wasting time. You've been working hard, responding quickly, attending meetings, following instructions, and adjusting your plans whenever someone with a sufficiently impressive job title changes direction. You've done everything a cooperative employee is supposed to do. Yet the more responsive you become, the harder it seems to finish anything. Your working day gradually transforms into a collection of interruptions connected by brief periods of attempted concentration. Every task is important, every deadline is ambitious, and every new request arrives with the unspoken assumption that everything you were previously doing will somehow continue progressing without you. Apparently, modern

businesses have discovered a revolutionary form of mathematics in which adding responsibilities does not increase the amount of work.

There is nothing inherently wrong with changing priorities. Businesses encounter new information, customers change their minds, competitors introduce unexpected offers, and carefully prepared plans sometimes become obsolete before anyone has finished admiring the charts. A manager who refuses to reconsider a decision under changing circumstances isn't necessarily demonstrating admirable consistency. Sometimes they're simply driving confidently toward a destination that no longer exists. The difficulty begins when changes arrive without clear explanations, without acknowledging previous commitments, and without deciding what should stop. A genuine change of priority involves choosing one thing over another. Simply declaring an additional task urgent while keeping every previous deadline intact is not prioritization. It's accumulating demands and hoping the employees have access to a previously undisclosed dimension of time.

You may already have tried several ways to survive this environment. Perhaps you became incredibly organized, created elaborate task lists, color-coded your calendar, and introduced a planning system so sophisticated that using it requires almost as much effort as completing your actual work. Perhaps you went in the opposite direction and decided to remain permanently flexible, abandoning your schedule whenever a new request appeared. You may even have started preparing multiple versions of important deliverables before anyone requested them, hoping to anticipate your boss's next change of mind. These strategies can occasionally help, but they share a weakness: they

concentrate on making you better at absorbing disruption without necessarily improving the decisions producing it.

Being adaptable is valuable. Becoming the workplace's unlimited shock absorber is considerably less attractive. If you're consistently willing to rearrange your commitments, work through breaks, or quietly extend your evenings, the people assigning work may never see the actual cost of their decisions. From their perspective, another request has been handled successfully. They don't necessarily see the important task you postponed, the concentration you lost, or the personal plans you sacrificed. Eventually, exceptional effort becomes the expected standard. Your reward for repeatedly making the impossible look manageable is often another opportunity to demonstrate that remarkable talent. It is a peculiar promotion system in which the job title stays the same while the workload develops ambitions of its own.

Of course, your boss may not be deliberately creating confusion. Managers often face contradictory demands from senior leaders, customers, and other departments. They may be making decisions with incomplete information or responding to pressures they haven't fully explained. Some are excellent at seeing opportunities but considerably less skilled at recognizing the operational consequences of pursuing them. Others think aloud, unaware that employees interpret every passing suggestion as an official instruction. Understanding these possibilities matters because effective responses depend on what is actually happening. A manager responding to a genuine emergency needs something different from a manager who repeatedly changes direction because a new idea sounded exciting during lunch. Neither situation improves much when everyone silently assumes they understand one another.

This book is about recovering clarity without expecting the workplace to become perfectly predictable. You'll learn to distinguish an actual decision from a suggestion, recognize when a change affects other commitments, and ask questions that make expectations easier to understand. You'll explore how to confirm important agreements without turning ordinary communication into a legal deposition, how to explain the cost of revisions without sounding uncooperative, and how to protect the concentration required to produce good work. There will also be situations where the sensible response isn't another clever productivity technique. Sometimes the workload is genuinely excessive, the decision-making process is broken, or your manager has no interest in changing how they operate. Those circumstances deserve realistic treatment, not another motivational speech about developing a positive attitude.

Consider a simple situation. You're halfway through preparing a supplier assessment when your manager asks you to complete an urgent comparison of three new vendors. Your immediate instinct might be to say, "Absolutely," then privately work out which existing commitment you can disappoint. A more useful conversation begins by identifying what the new request requires and what it displaces. You might explain that completing the comparison today means the original assessment will be ready on Thursday rather than Wednesday. Your manager can then choose which outcome matters more, suggest a narrower comparison, or provide additional support. You haven't refused to help or demanded control over the entire department. You've made the consequences of a choice visible before they become an unpleasant surprise. That

distinction is small enough to fit into an ordinary conversation and important enough to change how work gets assigned.

Naturally, not every workplace welcomes this kind of discussion. Some managers interpret questions as resistance, some organizations reward apparent enthusiasm more than realistic planning, and some employees have very limited authority over their schedules. There may be financial pressures, difficult relationships, or genuine concerns about how a supervisor will respond. It would be insulting to pretend that a perfectly worded sentence can overcome every imbalance of power. The aim is to give you practical options appropriate to different circumstances, including ways to reduce unnecessary work when you cannot change the person assigning it. Knowing where your influence ends is just as important as learning how to use the influence you have.

Another important change involves the way you evaluate your own performance. When directions keep shifting, it's easy to measure yourself against whichever expectation happens to be current. You may have completed exactly what was requested yesterday, only to discover today that the requirement has changed. That doesn't automatically make yesterday's effort incompetent or today's revision unreasonable. It means the circumstances need to be understood before anyone can fairly judge the outcome. You can take responsibility for the quality of your work without accepting personal responsibility for every decision made above you. You can also acknowledge your own mistakes without treating every altered deadline as evidence that you need to work harder.

Most importantly, you don't have to become a professional mind reader. You shouldn't need to interpret your manager's facial expressions, reconstruct half-remembered meeting conversations, or calculate the emotional significance of a message containing the words "quick question." You need a workable way to identify what matters, understand what has changed, and decide what can reasonably happen next. Some days that will mean adjusting quickly. Other days it will mean asking for a decision, explaining a limitation, or recognizing that a particular request cannot be fulfilled under the existing conditions. None of these responses requires hostility. They require clarity, judgment, and a willingness to stop making invisible promises on behalf of your future self.

Your boss may continue changing priorities faster than you switch tabs. Clients will still surprise you, plans will occasionally collapse, and someone will inevitably describe a substantial revision as "just a tiny tweak." This book won't eliminate those moments. It will help you respond without allowing every change to dismantle your entire working day. Because your job is to produce useful results, not to demonstrate how gracefully you can chase a moving target while pretending the target has been standing still all along.

Chapter 1 - When Everything Is a Priority, Nothing Gets to Be First

At 9:10 on Monday morning, Rebecca had a perfectly reasonable list of responsibilities. She managed facilities operations for a company occupying three office buildings. Her team needed to complete an equipment inventory, coordinate scheduled maintenance, and prepare several meeting rooms for an upcoming leadership event. None of this was particularly glamorous, but every task had a purpose, a deadline, and somebody depending on its completion. By lunchtime, however, the situation had changed. The finance director wanted an immediate review of utility costs. Human Resources needed several offices rearranged for a recruitment event. The operations director had suddenly decided that improving the visitor reception area was the week's most important objective. All three requests arrived with variations of the phrase "top priority." By Wednesday, Rebecca's original responsibilities were still waiting, the new requests were partially completed, and several executives were wondering why their particular emergencies weren't receiving enough attention. Rebecca was beginning to suspect that the company had accidentally hired three different people under her name.

This is what happens when an organization confuses importance with priority. A task can be important without being the thing that should receive attention first. Maintaining essential equipment matters. So does controlling costs, supporting recruitment, and creating a professional environment for visitors. The difficulty begins when these legitimate needs compete for the same people, hours, or

resources. Priority is supposed to resolve that competition. It identifies which commitment deserves attention ahead of another when both cannot proceed as originally planned. Without that comparison, calling something a priority expresses enthusiasm rather than making a decision. You might as well label every item in the office refrigerator "EAT FIRST." The labels would look wonderfully decisive, but nobody would be any closer to knowing what to have for lunch.

The confusion becomes particularly expensive when new priorities accumulate rather than replace existing ones. Rebecca received three additional requests, but nobody withdrew any earlier commitment. Her maintenance schedule still existed. The inventory still had a deadline. The meeting rooms still needed preparation. Yet the executives assigning new work behaved as though those responsibilities had quietly disappeared from the calendar. This is how a manageable workload becomes an impossible one without anybody explicitly authorizing the increase. Each individual request appears reasonable when considered separately. The combined workload tells a very different story. A manager can add another assignment in thirty seconds, while the employee receiving it may need several hours to complete it. The speed of delegation is not evidence that the capacity to deliver has increased.

An additional complication is that not everything a manager says is necessarily an instruction to change course. During a meeting, someone might observe that the office entrance looks outdated. Another person suggests investigating alternative suppliers. A senior executive asks whether the reception area could be improved. By the next morning, an enthusiastic employee may have contacted

contractors, requested quotations, and started preparing a renovation proposal. Meanwhile, the executive remembers making an observation, not commissioning a project. Ideas, requests for information, proposals, and approved assignments serve different purposes. Treating all four as immediate orders creates unnecessary work before anyone has decided whether the work is needed. A surprisingly useful professional skill is knowing when a comment belongs in the category of "interesting thought" rather than "cancel everything and begin construction."

It helps to recognize the different ways a task can change. A manager might move an existing assignment ahead of another, add something new, expand the scope of work already underway, or redefine the expected result entirely. These distinctions aren't merely administrative. They determine what happens to the effort you've already invested. Moving the equipment inventory to Thursday may require rearranging your schedule. Adding an inspection of another building requires additional capacity. Expanding the inventory to include detailed maintenance histories increases the work involved. Deciding that the original inventory should instead become a long-term asset management proposal changes the nature of the assignment. All four developments might be announced with the same innocent phrase: "There's been a small change." Their consequences are anything but identical.

Recognizing the type of change allows you to respond to the actual problem. If the order of tasks has changed, the central issue is what gets delayed. If additional work has appeared, you need to consider whether there is sufficient capacity. If the scope expands, you must understand which extra activities are required. If the desired outcome changes,

part of the previous effort may no longer be useful. You don't need a special form for each situation, and you certainly don't need to deliver a lecture on project management every time your boss approaches your desk. The distinction can happen in your own thinking before you respond. That brief moment of clarity prevents many unnecessary reactions, especially the automatic assumption that every new instruction requires abandoning everything else.

The hidden cost of unfinished attention

There is another reason constant reprioritization feels exhausting even when the total number of assignments doesn't appear extraordinary. Work requires context. When you're reviewing a complex maintenance contract, you need to remember which obligations are included, which charges are disputed, and which exceptions require further investigation. Interrupt the work for an unrelated request, and some of that context will need to be reconstructed when you return. Switching between computer windows is easy; switching between complicated mental problems is less cooperative. You may spend several minutes remembering why a particular figure looked suspicious before the interruption. Repeat this process throughout the day, and considerable effort goes into repeatedly preparing to work rather than completing the work itself.

This cost isn't always visible to the person assigning tasks. A manager sees that an employee spent the morning working on three different subjects. The employee experiences three separate periods of orientation, several unfinished decisions, and the frustration of repeatedly approaching a conclusion without reaching it. Not every interruption is harmful, of course. A genuine safety concern

may deserve immediate attention, and a brief question can sometimes unblock several colleagues. But interruptions should be judged by their consequences, not simply by how quickly the request can be expressed. "Can I borrow you for a second?" has an impressive history of introducing conversations that occupy considerably more than one second, sometimes followed by a meeting invitation to continue discussing the second in greater detail.

The situation can also create an illusion of progress. An organization launches another initiative, conducts another meeting, and updates another action tracker. Everyone appears busy, and the volume of communication increases. Yet important results remain incomplete because attention is repeatedly distributed across too many activities. A project that receives ten minutes from five different people does not necessarily advance as much as one receiving a focused hour from the person who can actually finish it. Activity measures how much people are doing. Progress concerns how much closer the organization is to an outcome it needs. If those two things become confused, a team can spend an impressive week producing updates about work that never quite reaches completion.

Consider what happens when the status of unfinished assignments remains ambiguous. Rebecca's inventory hasn't been cancelled, but it has been interrupted. The visitor reception project is underway, although nobody has approved a budget. The utility review has started, but the finance director hasn't supplied the necessary billing records. All three assignments might appear as "in progress" in a tracking system. That label hides critical differences. One task is waiting for available time, another needs a decision, and the third depends on missing information.

Treating them as equivalent encourages the assumption that Rebecca can accelerate them all through greater effort. She cannot personally produce the finance director's documents by becoming more enthusiastic about spreadsheets.

A useful first step is therefore to understand what is genuinely competing for your attention. Look at your existing commitments and distinguish the work you can actively advance from assignments awaiting information, decisions, or a future opportunity to resume. Some tasks may have become obsolete without anybody formally closing them. Others may remain essential despite receiving little recent attention. You don't need elaborate software to establish these differences. A straightforward list with the current state of each significant commitment can reveal where your available time is actually going. Its purpose is not to create a magnificent catalogue of everything that has ever been mentioned at work. It is to prevent old obligations and new requests from quietly occupying the same hours.

The next question is what determines priority when two activities compete. Deadline matters, but it isn't sufficient by itself. An approaching deadline might be flexible, while another task without a stated deadline could be preventing an entire team from proceeding. Consequences matter too. An inspection related to building safety deserves a different level of attention from a cosmetic improvement that would be pleasant to complete this month. Dependencies are equally important: a modest task may need immediate attention because several people cannot continue until it is finished. These considerations don't generate a mathematically perfect ranking. They help you distinguish meaningful urgency from whoever happened to send the latest message.

Suppose Rebecca learns that a scheduled maintenance inspection has uncovered a fault requiring qualified attention, while the reception redesign is awaiting a discussion about furniture finishes. The two matters are not equally urgent simply because both were described as priorities by senior colleagues. The potential consequences of delaying safety-related work deserve appropriate weight. Rebecca should follow the relevant procedures and involve qualified people rather than allowing the loudest requester to determine the response. In less serious conflicts, the choice may depend on business value, available resources, or commitments already made. The point is to use criteria connected to actual consequences. A person's seniority can determine who has authority to make a choice; it doesn't magically alter how long the work will take.

You can also learn something from the pattern of changes rather than analyzing every interruption as an isolated event. Over several working days, briefly record significant shifts: what you were doing, what changed, what caused the interruption, and what happened to the original commitment. Keep the record factual. "Visitor project assigned Tuesday; equipment inventory postponed; original Friday deadline unchanged" provides useful information. "Management has apparently abandoned reason" may feel satisfying to write, but it is less helpful in a discussion about improving work. After a few days, recurring problems may become clearer. Perhaps most changes originate from one weekly meeting. Perhaps assignments are routinely started before approval. Or perhaps genuinely urgent work is arriving through a channel designed for routine questions.

This observation should not become a surveillance hobby. There is no professional advantage in documenting every

raised eyebrow, passing remark, or suspiciously enthusiastic use of the word "exciting." Focus on changes with meaningful effects on deadlines, scope, responsibility, or completed effort. If you eventually discuss the problem with your manager, concrete examples will provide a more constructive starting point than general complaints. They also protect you from assuming that every difficult day reflects the same underlying issue. An unusual customer emergency and a recurring failure to choose between competing projects may feel equally disruptive, but they call for different responses.

It's worth examining your own assumptions as well. Employees sometimes create additional urgency by treating every request from a senior person as an instruction for immediate completion. A message asking whether something is possible becomes an assignment. A suggested improvement becomes a deadline. A task without a delivery date gets inserted ahead of work that genuinely must be finished today. This doesn't make the employee responsible for unclear management communication. It does mean that recognizing your own interpretations can prevent unnecessary disruption. The fact that a director has asked a question doesn't automatically mean that the answer must arrive before the director has finished their coffee.

There are limits, however, to what personal organization can achieve. Some workplaces genuinely assign more work than available resources can accommodate. Others expect employees to maintain every previous deadline despite repeated changes imposed from above. In those circumstances, prioritization cannot simply mean arranging impossible commitments in an attractive order. The conflict requires an organizational decision about workload, timing,

or scope. You may be able to recommend that decision, but you cannot necessarily make it yourself. Treating a structural capacity problem as a personal failure of discipline merely delays an honest conversation about what can be delivered.

Rebecca's situation becomes easier to understand once the assignments are separated into real decisions rather than a single enormous pile of urgency. She can identify the work that needs attention now, the projects requiring approval, and the commitments affected by new requests. She may still have a difficult conversation with the executives involved, and she won't necessarily receive every resource she needs. But she can stop pretending that every task deserves the same immediate response. That is where effective prioritization begins: not with a more colorful calendar, but with the recognition that choosing what matters also means acknowledging what must wait.

If everything is described as the number-one priority, the organization doesn't have a particularly ambitious priority system. It has a collection of first-place trophies and nobody willing to judge the competition.

Chapter 2 - Why Your Boss Was Absolutely Certain Yesterday and Absolutely Certain of the Opposite Today

The announcement sounded definitive. A regional transport company was redesigning its passenger information service, and the customer experience director had decided that improving digital notifications was the immediate priority. The team would concentrate on giving passengers clearer information through the company's mobile application. The director explained the reasoning, approved the initial approach, and congratulated everyone on finally establishing a coherent direction. Forty-eight hours later, after attending a meeting with several station managers, he announced that physical information displays needed attention first. The following week, a board member complained about the mobile application, and digital notifications returned to the top of the agenda. Sophie, the project coordinator, began to wonder whether the company's strategy was being managed by a committee or by a particularly indecisive weather vane.

From Sophie's perspective, the director kept changing his mind. From his perspective, he was responding to important information. Both descriptions could be accurate, yet neither fully explained what was happening. The director might have heard legitimate concerns from station managers about passengers who rarely used the application. The board member might have identified a significant problem with digital communication. These were potentially valuable

observations. What remained unclear was why every new conversation appeared to overturn the previous decision rather than contribute to a broader assessment. The organization wasn't necessarily suffering from a shortage of information. It may have been struggling to compare information gathered at different moments and from people with different interests.

Managers rarely make decisions with complete knowledge. They usually work with a mixture of available facts, forecasts, personal experience, expectations from senior leaders, and assumptions that haven't yet been tested. When new information arrives, responsible managers should sometimes reconsider their choices. The difficulty is determining whether the information genuinely changes the situation. Hearing that physical displays are important doesn't automatically establish that digital notifications should be postponed. Discovering that the mobile application has problems doesn't prove that every other communication initiative should stop. Both observations might be relevant without justifying a complete reversal. Good judgment requires comparing the new evidence with what was already known, rather than allowing the latest conversation to replace the entire previous discussion.

One reason this goes wrong is that immediate concerns can feel more significant than less visible ones. A director spends an hour listening to frustrated station managers and leaves with a strong impression that their problem deserves urgent attention. Later, a senior executive describes complaints about the mobile application, and that issue suddenly feels more pressing. Neither group is necessarily exaggerating. The director's attention simply moves toward whichever concern has most recently been presented with