

PRIORITIZATION IS A TEAM SKILL

NOT JUST A LEADERSHIP
RESPONSIBILITY

Build Better Judgment
Below Leadership



THE HIDDEN CAUSE

How leadership becomes a prioritization bottleneck

When it comes to prioritization, many organizations still expect leadership to sort, rank, and referee.

That creates a **predictable pattern**:

- **Independent contributors** surface issues, but do not classify them
- **Managers** escalate work, but do not frame it
- **Leaders** inherit a blended pile of requests, risks, ideas, and operational noise

When decision quality is weak below the top, decision volume rises at the top.

BOTTOM LINE: If you want teams to be proactive and empowered, they need to understand how to classify work and make tradeoff-oriented recommendations before escalating.

THE REAL PROBLEM

Teams were taught to escalate not to evaluate

There is a **difference between escalation and judgment.**

Few have been trained to assess:

- What kind of work something is
- How urgent it really is
- What impact it creates
- Whether it is strategic, operational, regulatory, or maintenance-driven
- What tradeoff it requires
- Whether leadership input is actually needed

Without that shared discipline, everything starts to look equally important.

OWN IT: Prioritization is not just choosing what goes first. It is knowing how to evaluate work before asking someone else to choose.

WHAT ORGS SHOULD DO

Teach teams to classify work first

Before escalating, managers and teams should be able to answer:

- What type of work is this?
- What problem does it solve?
- Who is affected?
- What is the timing pressure, if any?
- What is the likely impact? What are the consequences of doing nothing?
- What are the dependencies?
- What would this displace if it moves up?
- What is our recommendation?
- What decision actually requires leadership?

This shifts the conversation from “Here is more work” to “Here is an evaluated tradeoff.”

SET EXPECTATIONS: Leadership should not be asked to sort raw inputs. They should be asked to make decisions on framed choices.

WHAT MANAGERS SHOULD OWN

Managers should filter, not forward the pile

Managers should be the **first meaningful layer** of prioritization judgment.

Their job is to:

- **Coach** teams on how to assess work
- **Challenge** vague urgency
- **Separate** signal from noise
- **Make preliminary tradeoff calls** within their scope
- **Escalate** only what crosses a real threshold

When they do not filter and frame, leadership inherits noise instead of decisions.

REALITY CHECK: What leaders tolerate becomes the operating standard. If leaders keep accepting everything in raw form, teams learn that the safest move is to bring everything upward.

TEACH PRIORITIZATION JUDGMENT IN PRACTICE

Better prioritization starts before leadership gets involved

A few practical ways organizations can build this muscle:

- **Create** a small shared classification model for work types
- **Teach** teams to separate urgency from importance
- **Require** every escalation to include a recommendation
- **Review** examples together in team meetings
- **Let managers** make more first-level calls within defined guardrails
- **Use leadership** time to handle exceptions, not intake triage

THE POINT: Teams develop prioritization judgment through repetition, not slogans. It must be taught, modeled, and reinforced in real work.

THE PAYOFF

Better judgment, fewer bottlenecks, stronger leadership focus

You don't need better sorting at the top. You need better judgment throughout the org.

When teams and managers know how to classify and frame the work before escalation:

- Managers become **stronger operators**
- ICs build **better judgment**
- Prioritization conversations get **faster** and more grounded
- Escalations become **more meaningful**
- **Leaders can focus** on real tradeoffs, not sorting

THE GOAL: Build enough prioritization judgment throughout the org so leaders only need to step in when true tradeoffs, risk, or strategic choices exist.