

ODEx Perspectives Vol. 4

PRIORITISATION & LEADERSHIP

USING THE S.C.A.L.E FRAMEWORK



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INTRODUCTION

Prioritisation is not a word or concept that is new to public service and yet, following the Employee Engagement Survey (EES) 2021, it has been on the minds of many public service officers. Our Public Service World now is a complex workload mixture of “business as usual” (BAU), COVID-19 related prevention and maintenance work as well as emergent, new and shifting trends to anticipate and prepare for.

In this context, prioritisation is not an easy task. However, many public service officers and leaders cannot deny that it is what we need to do now and do better. How then do we go about prioritising our own work and supporting our leaders in their prioritisation efforts?

INTENTIONS OF THE S.C.A.L.E FRAMEWORK

Since October 2021, the Transformation (TX) Team in the Institute of Leadership and Organisational Development (ILOD) has worked on multiple consultancy projects to support EES efforts. We have consolidated observations and insights from these projects to develop a framework that focuses on prioritisation, putting together 5 dimensions based on ground insights and key principles in the domains of organisation transformation and organisation development.

Strategy

Culture

Alignment

Leadership

Empowerment

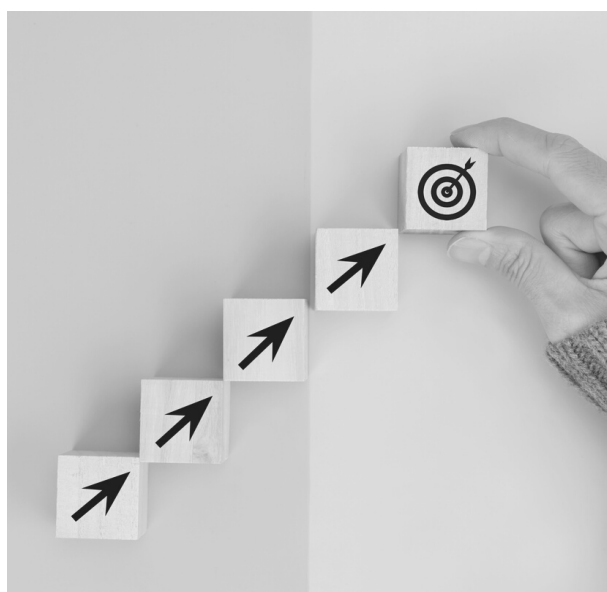
The **S.C.A.L.E. Framework** provides a lens to systemically examine one's organisation to tackle the roots of prioritisation – which is inherently about utilising the scarce resources of time, energy and talents to achieve the organisation's strategic goals and mandate. It encourages leaders to have open discussions about the business of prioritisation in their agencies and also allows public service officers to hold the necessary conversations amongst themselves to effect prioritisation at various levels*.

**We recommend considering ways to apply this framework to at least three levels of your agency system to achieve systemic alignment and sustainable change.*

START WITH STRATEGY

In order to prioritise well, we need to focus on strategy as a starting point. That requires **intentionality, clarity and anticipation** of what needs to be achieved and how we are going to get there. However, we also know that while continuing with our BAUs, that is easier said than done. Efforts to prioritise therefore begin with having intentional conversations. You can start by inviting your leaders and/or team members to think through these suggested questions when strategising:

- *What is our mandate now?*
- *What has shifted/not shifted? What might we need to shift (to prepare for what is coming)?*
- *What are the key pieces of work that will help us achieve our mandate?*
- *What is our value-add that we can bring to our stakeholders?*



What the questions support in doing is to help teams and leaders anticipate and consider the key pieces of work that will achieve the shared end goal. If you are a leader, your staff would probably look to you for answers and direction on what and how to prioritise. However, you do not need to shoulder all the responsibility to provide answers. The value of these questions lies in opening up the space to have conversations to gather staff feedback, thoughts and opinions. With more information and help coming from the staff, you get a better sensing of what is critical for your Agency's progress. A senior public service leader once asked his team to identify three areas to work on for EES to encourage not only himself but his staff to anticipate what work would be valuable to the organisation up-cycle. Getting the team involved is a way to encourage them to better understand and appreciate the organisations challenges and has the effect of building a sense of ownership and engagement.

CONSIDER HOW YOUR ORGANISATION CULTURE CAN SUPPORT PRIORITISATION

The familiar adage “culture eats strategy for breakfast” is a useful reminder that without shifting culture, all strategic intents and purposes will only fall short in the organisation. To shift culture, installing a system to encourage and reward behaviours and norms of how people say “yes” and “no” to work is key.

The practice of glorifying over-work is not sustainable. Today, organisations are starting to recognise that saying “no” to non-essential or non-strategic work is in fact a sign of healthy time and energy management. This behaviour illustrates a person’s ability to assess the request and resources required before making commitment¹. Knowing how to recognise and reward such essential management skills is vital to achieving optimal performance in teams. Teams that can prioritise their essential and strategic work has a better spread of projects that ensure they stay relevant and agile. Team members do not feel they are over-burdened and are more willing to remain in the team or organisation to contribute. To better advise and support our teams, we would need to learn to recognise such behaviours. You can consider the following questions to suss out these behaviours in the team or organisation.

- *What are the reactions we have when we want to say ‘no’ to a piece of work?*
- *Do you find yourself (or your staff) saying ‘yes’ more than ‘no’?*
- *What are we communicating to staff when we take on work that is above and beyond what is core to our mandate?*
- *What mindsets are we inculcating when we fail to acknowledge and/or appreciate staff for saying ‘no’ to make room for innovation and experimentation?*
- *What can we do to acknowledge and appreciate staff for exercising time and/or energy management strategies that benefit teams they work in?*

We learnt some useful sample practices during our consulting work connections with the Agencies. One leader we worked with emailed the division to thank employees for putting up requests to drop work. This example showed how leaders play an essential role to serve as the “influencer” that acknowledges and recognizes employees for saying ‘no’ as a way of prioritizing work. The employees demonstrated that they are committed to effectiveness by de-prioritizing some work projects. In doing so, they showed that for prioritization to work, it requires collective effort from both employees and leaders. Leaders thus need to work with their teams to find common ground on what needs to be done.

¹ From HBR’s “How to say no to taking on more work” ([How to Say No to Taking on More Work \(hbr.org\)](https://hbr.org/2016/04/how-to-say-no-to-taking-on-more-work/))

SEEK ALIGNMENT WITH STAKEHOLDERS FOR PRIORITISATION EFFORTS

Start with reaching out to employees, but do not stop there. Leaders also need to consider horizontal collaborations across departments and divisions and with external stakeholders to reach an agreement for better prioritisation of work. Tapping on the wisdom of leaders above us (upwards), peers next to us (sideways) and what subordinates hear or experience on the ground (downwards) can provide a well-rounded systemic view of what and where energies should be focused on when prioritising work. Having this well-rounded view can help us examine these questions better.

- *Which organisational processes either help or hinder our performance today?*
- *How can we align processes that would accelerate the performance of individual staff and also that of teams?*

CARING FOR LEADERSHIP HEALTH

If you are a leader, do take time for yourself to recuperate and recharge. One senior leader asked his staff to keep two hours each week as unplanned 'free' time where they do not meet but they spend time to reflect, recharge and defuse attention so that they can do more productive work when they refocus later. If you support leaders at work, offer to hold the space for reflection and interpersonal relationship building if you can. If your leaders prefer to self-organise, remind them to hold such conversations and connections with one another as a leadership team. Support your leaders by encouraging them to take 20% of white space time for reflection. As Peter Drucker says, "Follow effective action with quiet reflection. From the quiet reflection will come even more effective action"².

² Knight, Rebecca. "How to Say No to Taking on More Work." Harvard Business Review, <https://hbr.org/2015/12/how-to-say-no-to-taking-on-more-work>, 29 December 2015.

PRIORITISE **EMPOWERMENT** OF EMPLOYEES TO ACHIEVE MORE

As leaders, make empowering others a practice, or an art form. Our ILOD researchers opined that empowering your staff with the conditions to maximise their performance³, as well as partnering with peers to come together to co-create solutions can make prioritisation seems less daunting. Similar to what Harvard Business Review explains, “success depends on proactive communication, trust building and frequent engagement”. To see success, leaders can create conditions in the work environment that will nurture empowerment, alignment and even camaraderie in tackling massive efforts.

To do that with strategic intent, clarity and a motivation for change, leaders need to take the time and space to rest as well as to think and plan. The following questions can be helpful.

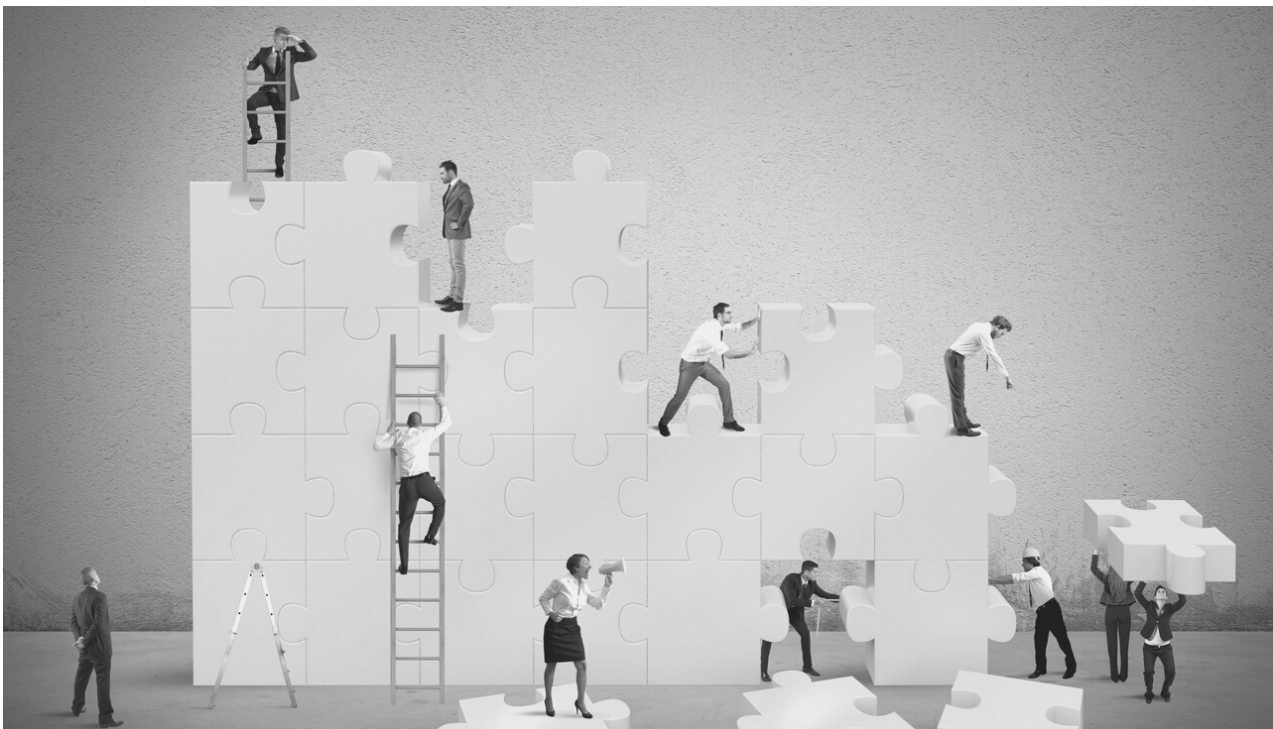
- *What is the overall intent that needs to be achieved?*
- *What kind of resource management behaviours and norms are needed to enable that outcome?*
- *Who can I tap on and what roles are needed for the task?*
- *What do I need to be clear about to unite those around towards that common goal?*
- *How am I showing up as a leader to enable unity and teamwork?*



³ Khoo, Ee Wan and Amos Law. "Leaders Behaviours and Employee Engagement: A Review of the Literature." CSC-ILOD Research Catalogue. 6 April 2022.

CONCLUSION

The S.C.A.L.E. Framework is an approach to help build your own Agency's prioritisation strategies. Its value lies in drawing upon insights from some 34 consultancy projects ILOD did across the Public Service in support of the EES 2021 efforts. The key "moves" for prioritisation in our Public Service World are that (i) prioritisation is the result of intentionality and reflection on what truly matters and (ii) prioritise working with people in the organisation by first engaging with them to hear what they can suggest and inform about their areas of work is an efficient way to get them involved. Inevitably, it will take committed practice on the part of leaders, OD practitioners and employees to figure out a prioritisation approach that suits your contexts together. Let our S.C.A.L.E. Framework illuminate the possibilities for you as you move forward in prioritisation efforts.



Connect with us for consultancy services on prioritisation planning, transformation, organisation development and hybrid work design (e.g. *leadership team alignment, senior-middle management engagement, bespoke design and facilitation of workshops*).

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