

## “The Main Thing is to Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing”

By Susan Schilke; November 1, 2017

Can you believe it’s already November?

You may be saying this to yourself, and you’ll likely hear it from others in the next few weeks. The year is winding down. How did that happen?

Same way it happens every year. But somehow, the relentlessness of time seems to weigh on us even more these days. And it seems harder to live the Stephen Covey quote that is the title of this article. How do you keep the main thing the main thing when there is so much to do every day and so much happening every moment? It’s become harder than ever to maintain our focus on the most important things in our companies and our lives.

And that’s not okay.

Last month I introduced a new TeamStrength tool – the Take Aim Business Scope. It is designed for leaders to identify and articulate the inspiration and motivators (Mission & Vision), the critical behaviors and actions (Values & Strategy); the aspirations (Goals); and how this is all relevant to team members at every level (Alignment). Having clear answers to a few critical questions and communicating the answers to the entire team is the consistent practice of the high-performing organization.

Most TeamStrength members have many of these categories well-defined. When asked, the areas that most members felt were undefined were:

**What’s most important now?** and

**What’s the key focus for team members?**

Unfortunately, these may be the most critical.

If leaders understand the goals and the strategy but haven’t identified the most important current focus to get to the next level, how does it happen? If team members are inspired and motivated, and know how to behave, but don’t have a clear picture of the current priority and the actions required, how will they take you where you want to go?

In every organization, there are persistent, daily requirements of identifying and securing new customers, providing products and services, and controlling costs. At the same time, there are emerging challenges and/or opportunities that require focus, collaboration and actions plans in order to chart a path to continued growth and profitability.

The same is true in our individual lives. We are constantly juggling our combination of work demands, family and friendships, and our own physical and spiritual health. And at any given time, there is usually a challenge or opportunity that necessitates more investment in one of these areas.

Recently, Hurricane Irma provided the ultimate example of both distraction and focus. On one hand, this powerful, never-ending storm pulled us away from... well, everything. On the other hand, Irma provided an amazing lesson in the power of prioritization. For a period of time, everyone

shared the same top priority – preparing for and recovering from the storm. There was a crystal-clear alignment on priorities – keep ourselves, our families and our team member safe, then be ready to solve the issues created by the storm to get our lives and our companies back to fully operational. That single-minded clarity was beautiful – and created productivity and a spirit of community in our neighborhoods and in our offices. It took a life-threatening event to enable that focus.

What if we applied the same level of focus and urgency to our current initiatives?

Here are some simple actionable ways to keep the main thing the main thing:

1. Make strategic planning time with your leadership team a mandatory, urgent priority. You should be focused on reviewing Mission, Vision and Values; reevaluating and tweaking Strategy; setting long- and short-term Goals, and Aligning actions, metrics and rewards for every team member. Don't wait for 2018 to take aim for the new year. Start now!
2. Every time you have a conversation with your fellow leaders, talk about what's most important right now. Review progress, make decisions, establish action plans, and agree on who does what by when and the message you take to the team.
3. Take time every week for your personal plan. Don't start with a review of your calendar and task list. Schedule your priorities – don't prioritize your schedule. Start the weekly planning process with a set of prompts on the critical areas of your personal and professional life. Give these focus first – in your planning and on your calendar.
4. Regularly, aggressively, evaluate your life for things that are requiring an investment of time but don't align with your priorities or serve your goals. Then stop doing them.
5. Have the courage to say 'no' to things that are not important to you. Take the time to clearly establish the scope, parameters and timeline of initiatives. Hold yourself and others accountable. Don't let the goal of perfection get in the way of completion.
6. Repeat 1-5.

Most importantly, **narrow your focus**. Aiming for too many targets at once typically means missing them all. Take aim one target at a time.

The truth in today's world is that there are thousands of other things inviting our attention – outside the important things we want to focus on. Most people spend too much time on the urgent and not enough time on the important. Distractions abound in our world – and it requires a focused effort to take a moment to hold it all at arms' length and remind ourselves what matters most. **We must take aim at investing our time on the things that matter most.**