

The great thing about priorities is that you can always go one higher

devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20081121-00

November 21, 2008



Raymond Chen

The phenomenon I call *priority inflation* has spread to product planning documents as well. Back in the old days, there were three priority levels:

- Priority 1: *must have*. If you don't accomplish a priority 1 item, you may as well just cancel the project because it ain't shipping.
- Priority 2: *should have*. If you don't accomplish a priority 2 item, the product is significantly weaker, but you can still ship it.
- Priority 3: *nice to have*. If you don't accomplish a priority 3 item, it's not quite as awesome as it could have been, but it's still a good product.

Over the past few years, I've seen a shift in the labelling of priorities in planning documents. A new priority has been introduced: *Priority Zero*. Nobody has explained to me what *Priority 0* means, but I assume somebody invented it to emphasize that the feature is *even more critical than priority 1*. Mind you, I'm not sure what could be more important to a project than "If we don't do this, we're all fired." Maybe "If we don't do this, the earth will explode."

As you might expect, priority inflation has a trickle-down effect. People whose features had been assigned priority 1 said, "Hey, how come my feature isn't priority 0? It's just as critical as that other guy's feature." Soon, everything that was priority 1 got reclassified as priority 0. Nature abhors a vacuum, so all the priority 2 items got reclassified as priority 1, and the priority 3 items got reclassified as priority 2.

In the end, nothing changed aside from the names on the buckets. It's been years since I've seen a planning document with any priority 3 items. It's all zero, one, and two now.

Wait, I lied. The meaning of the last bucket (the former priority 3, now named priority 2) has changed. It used to be things that would be *nice to have*, but now it appears to be used for *something other people suggested which I didn't think was important, but I didn't want to*

be mean and reject it outright, so I'm listing it here to make those people feel better and showing that their "voice was heard," but don't kid yourself; we're not going to do it. In other words, priority 2 means No.

I give it three years before somebody decides that an issue is even more critical than priority 0 and labels it *Priority -1*.

Epilogue: After I originally wrote this entry, I've learned that some teams have indeed come up with a priority level even more important than Priority 0. It's called *Priority Now*.

Raymond Chen

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