The Priorities of Getting it Right and Getting Along

By Peter C. DeMarco

If leaders want to get “it”—their choices and actions—right, why do they spend so much time trying to help their employees to Get Along?

A priority is a choice among two or more competing goods when time is limited. Getting it Right and Getting Along are vital priorities on a good team. “Getting it Right” means that we know the principles at stake and choose the correct action to fit the situation. “Getting Along” refers to how well and how correctly we relate to others, particularly in relation to the action—the “it”—that has been chosen. Thoughtful, respectful, constructive (and sometimes heated) dialogue is key to Getting it Right and Getting Along in an authentic way.

Think of the priorities as interacting along two axes. Get it Right is the vertical axis, reflecting people’s natural orientation toward what is true, good, even beautiful. Get Along is the horizontal axis, showing people’s need to relate to one another in a healthy way. The arc of the model, the efficient frontier, identifies where the optimal practice of these two priorities results in achieving goals effectively and ethically. The area beneath the arc signifies the proper balance of cooperative and productive activities enabled when the two priorities are practiced together. Putting the priorities of Getting it Right and Getting Along together is a necessary skill for a leader to be successful in the world today.

A culture thrives, stagnates or declines as human choice is exercised well or poorly along the efficient frontier. While only one approach is best, leaders and employees prioritize Getting it Right and Getting Along in four ways:

1. Inverters: Place a priority on Getting Along at the expense of Getting it Right.
2. Absolutists: Invoke the priority of Getting it Right at the expense of Getting Along.
3. Depleters: Fail to Get it Right and to Get Along because of poor character, lack of competence or both.
4. Optimizers: Get it Right and Get Along. At the margin, they choose Getting it Right over Getting Along.

This article explores each form of prioritizing, presents the most common scenarios, and provides leaders, employees and teams with a framework to improve their priority choices.

Type I: The Inverter

Getting Along at the expense of Getting it Right

Inversions are the most insidious form of prioritizing because they invite the greatest rationalization. A priority inversion occurs when a lower priority starves or suffocates the resource or time needs of a higher priority. Work teams experience an inversion when their leaders or colleagues put the priority of Getting Along at the expense of Getting it Right. Of all the priority tensions, inversions occur most often and last the longest before they are discovered and dealt with.

Performance evaluations and layoffs reveal the most common inversions. Take Morgan, a manager who believes that a team that Gets Along gets ahead. Each year he rates his employees highly on their performance appraisals. Everyone is happy until Morgan is told by his boss that sales are down and he must lay off several of his employees. Morgan panics. He realizes that the same amount of work will remain, so he chooses to lay off his employees based on their actual performance.

Morgan’s choices in these two situations (both the performance evaluations and the layoffs) reflect priority inversions. He ends up making unethical decisions because he has misapplied the principles of fairness: equality (treating others the same) and equity (treating others according to what they deserve). For the perfor-
formance evaluations, Morgan prioritizes the principle of equality over equity. But for the layoff, he reverses the order, choosing equity over equality, because he wants to keep only the good performers even though the situation requires him to treat each employee equally if they are rated similarly. Knowing the principles at stake is only a start. Prioritizing them correctly is key to making good choices (Getting it Right) in relation to others (Getting Along).

“Don’t rock the boat”

A priority inversion may be the result of a structural problem in the organization or industry. Everyone is in the same boat, so if anyone stands up and starts to question the way things are working, the agitation and rocking caused by the challenge could sink the rest of the group. Getting Along appears safer than the alternative of Getting it Right. The status quo prevails, not because people dislike change but because they dislike disorder. After all, things appear to be fine until a crisis disturbs the façade of Getting Along and the long-term conflicts below the surface demand attention.

The mortgage banking crisis was driven by what one senior executive called “a remarkably incestuous cycle” of Getting Along. Each group in the system was bound to the other rather than checking and keeping each other honest. The result was a securities market in which the assets being sold failed to reflect their true risks. Don’t rock the boat priority inversions are difficult to undo. Righting the ship may mean throwing the bad members overboard before it sinks.

Trust traps

Inverters are also more likely to be snared in a trust trap. This kind of inversion occurs when a leader or team member grants trust where it is either undeserved or inappropriate. Just trust me on this one or It’s a slam dunk are statements too many leaders have come to regret believing. Inverters use the appeal of trust to rationalize a decision. Teams who accept the word of their colleagues without examining the complexity of the situation create a false form of cooperation and collegiality. Healthy skepticism, as embodied in the Russian proverb trust but verify, avoids this trap.

The high producer temptation

Prioritizing Getting Along over Getting it Right also creates an inversion I call the high producer temptation. This inversion occurs when a leader, under tremendous pressure to deliver results, looks the other way on a top producer’s questionable conduct. One company president advised his managers that “Sometimes you just have to turn a ‘blind eye’ to these problems with your high performers.”

A vice president gave me a similar example: He ignored the danger signals from his best salesperson because “The guy always made his numbers and I was too busy putting out other fires.” The subsequent fraud investigation uncovered a history of ethical lapses that should have been dealt with earlier. The leader admitted that he sensed something was wrong but had hoped “it” would resolve itself. “It” rarely does.

The courage test for the leader is most difficult when a star performer has lied, stolen, cheated or violated standards of professional conduct. At these critical times, yielding to the high producer temptation ruins the reputation of the leader who, after spending years preaching about ethics, falters when the choice to “Get it Right” counts more.

Type II: The Absolutist

Getting it Right at the expense of Getting Along

The opposite of an Inverter is an absolutist. In his or her zeal to Get it Right, the Absolutist burns bridges with others rather than finding ways to respectfully work through difficult conflicts.

Absolutists have a my way or the highway or I know better than you mentality. Compromise is not a part of their vocabulary. They can be overbearing and unable to trust others. Intolerance, rigidity or ideological purity is at work in their character. Absolutists walk away from efforts to Get Along because they lay claim to the whole truth. Ultimately, they fail the priority of Getting it Right because a lack of open-mindedness restricts their capacity to consider other views.
What upsets or unnerves Absolutists is when their view of reality fails to hold up. An absence of doubt, reflection or curiosity blinds them. Instead, they prefer to blame others rather than accept responsibility for their poor judgment or ignorance. The less-frequent reaction of bewilderment occurs when Absolutists realize that their ideologies on life and people are wrong.6

However well-intentioned, the Absolutist tends to use hyperbole to promote an unsustainable reality: *We have a zero-tolerance for this or that or We must win at any cost or We require 100% accuracy on everything.* One high-performing executive said the culture he worked in talked constantly about risk, but with a “no fail” option attached to each decision. “It was oppressive and suffocating,” he said. “We were expected to execute everything flawlessly, which was impossible. It was a ‘no win’ environment.” A chief operating officer told me, “My boss intellectualizes risk, but I have to live it.” He was referring to his CEO’s tendency to make bold claims to Wall Street only to fall short quarter after quarter. Absolutists believe they can impose their own reality on others by simply *willing* it. Some are strangely effective at this approach, for a time.

### Putting the priorities of Getting it Right and Getting Along together is a necessary skill for a leader to be successful in the world today.

A cynic is a particular type of absolutist. Many are defeated idealists. Their former high ideals were so exaggerated that they refused to accept the imperfections in themselves and others. In a very real way, cynicism is also a consequence of how the Absolutist leads: People are seen as means to the absolutist’s objectives. Relationships are defined by winning and losing rather than shared experiences.

### Horizontal hostility

An entire team in the organization can develop an Absolutist mindset, reflected in a phenomenon called *horizontal hostility.* Groups that must work together develop suspicion and hostility toward each other because one group believes that the other is not sufficiently Getting it Right.7 For example, in the nursing profession, where the consequences of mistakes are high, teams can become so focused on executing their respective tasks—which must be done right—that instead of supporting one another, they become hostile and territorial. The failure to Get Along harms cooperation critical to Getting it (good patient care) Right.

### Dead right: Creating unnecessary hostility

Good decisions can evoke negative responses disproportionate to the situation. This scenario occurs when the leader is trying to Get it Right (and is not pressed for time), but fails to reach out to opponents of his ideas to explain the reasons behind a decision. The hostility created by the decision—even if it is right—exceeds the benefit of the decision itself.

When I was a young infantry officer, I was rebuked by my commander for giving an order that was not required. My unnecessary exercise of authority created grumbling among subordinates. Drawing from a historical example, my boss reminded me that even the Popes invoked infallibility only a half-dozen times in the last thousand years. He taught me a lesson I never forgot: Time permitting, exhaust reasonable options before invoking the power of your position to defend a decision.

### Type III: The Depleter

**Failing to Get it Right and to Get Along**

Depleters are the worst kind of prioritizer, failing to “Get it Right” and “Get Along.” Hardcore Depleters are anti-social and skilled at hiding their incompetence or poor character. When something or someone is depleted, its natural energy or resources to function as intended have been rendered ineffective or exhausted.

Pleas to “Get Along” accompany chronic situations of depletion. The breakdown of the group’s capacity to reason collectively becomes more severe as the gap deepens between Getting it Right and Getting Along.

Work teams experience depletion in a variety of ways. A new product is late in development because key people are not working well together or listening to the person with the right idea. Depleters harm relationships, suffocate innovation, and disturb the team ethos.8

Depleters are not always easy to recognize. One executive said his newly promoted boss entered the job with a change mandate: “He treated us like we were losers even though most of the executives were thought of highly. They finally fired him, but not until intense damage had been done to the team. All of us were tainted by the event because we had tried to Get Along with him for far too long. We ended up not getting anything right.”

Because of their nature, bureaucracies often fail at both priorities. Recall the testimony of Harry Markopolos to Congress on the Bernie Madoff ponzi scheme. Over a seven-year period, this independent investigator uncovered a number of irregularities that he reported to the
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Depleters function at or near the point of abandonment of both priorities.

Blame games
One of my clients had a small group of sales managers who resisted the new training and planning that was needed to quickly adapt to the recession in their industry. They viewed the training skeptically, suspecting that the operations team would have trouble delivering the revamped product line on time. So the sales team skipped the training, maintained focus on the old products and, as a result, missed critical revenue targets. Consequently, the sales team had to work more hours and had no time to train. Each group—sales and operations—blamed the other, and the bickering detracted from their ability to Get it Right. When a company doesn’t sell what it can make or make what it can sell, both priorities fail. The situation was self-defeating.

Do-overs
Sometimes the best action a leader can take when faced with a group of Depleters is a complete “do-over.” In other words, wipe out the former organization and start over. The president of a major consumer markets division with nearly 18,000 employees wisely took this approach. When the talent acquisition personnel failed to execute on his growth strategy, he wanted to understand why. The recruiters blamed their internal customers for not interviewing their candidates, and the managers complained that the recruiters were not sending them highly qualified candidates. Each group pointed a finger at the other for failing to find and recruit top talent to the organization. Rather than implement changes or selective firings, the president identified the real Depleters, shut down the recruiting operation and started over. The message was clear: You’re not only NOT Getting it Right but you’re not even Getting Along, so get out!

That is why the question, If you could do it over again, what would you do? is about poor decisions. Do it (the do-over) now, not later as a pondered regret.

Type IV: The Optimizer
Getting it Right and Getting Along

The best kind of prioritizer is the Optimizer who seeks to maximize the two priorities for the situation. In fact, he or she is so focused on Getting it Right—and making sure that others are Getting it Right—that there is little time for not Getting Along. The Optimizer is a taskmaster with time, focused on the urgent but not distracted by it. Yet, he or she makes time to reflect and draw deeper insights from his experiences and failures. One successful CEO who had overcome significant failures told me, “If you are always Getting it Right, then you are just plain lucky!”

Optimizers are decisive and rarely coercive. They are natural influencers but will invoke their authority when they must. If wrong, they take responsibility and try again until they Get it Right. The Optimizer seeks to improve the quality of individual choice for the sake of a common collective understanding of right choice. Ethics finds greater meaning and application this way.

Great religions reflect this ethical reality through powerful priority statements. The two greatest command-
ments are to first love God (Get it Right) with all your heart; and second, to love your neighbors (Get Along). The lower priority brings clarity and power to the higher one, and fulfilling the higher priority requires action on the lower one.

Along the efficient frontier

The dynamic between these two priorities is elastic and integrated into the efficient frontier of getting things done. It is along this frontier that leaders make optimal judgments about people in particular situations, even when time is limited.

Excellence in professional life requires an Optimizer mindset, even in positions not normally thought of that way. A mediator finds a way to help two warring parties to Get Along so that Getting it Right has a chance to occur. A diplomat builds a foundation for Getting it Right by seeking common ground upon which to Get Along. Before exploring difficult topics, trust must be built in the relationship. A probability of Getting it Right can’t occur without first creating the possibility. Decades ago, police departments discovered that if they seek to Get it Right (keep order and reduce crime) at the expense of Getting Along with the very community they are sworn to protect, the community treats them as badly as the criminals.

The Optimizer engages possibilities along the frontier through a combination of healthy skepticism and optimism. Here the richness, depth and potency of reality itself appears. What distinguishes the Optimizer from others is that he can see the edge of reality along the frontier and decide—rather than avoid—what must be done. Like a driver holding the line in a race car, winning requires maintaining control at the maximum speed. Put speed over control and the result is a crash. Mistakes (non-fatal crashes) deepen the optimizer’s character and competence. Courage keeps the Optimizer in the race. Optimism sustains and strengthens him. And, healthy skepticism keeps the Optimizer alive.

Professionalism embodies both priorities. True professionals Get it Right because they choose to fulfill the responsibilities and standards of their professions. Its members reveal the higher ethic at stake by how they Get Along and police themselves. The profession itself demands this kind of priority alignment to maintain or restore its identity and integrity.

The Optimizer state of prioritizing is the most difficult to attain and hold. Professional life can reveal one state, and personal life another. I knew an executive who was an Optimizer at work, yet in dealing with his children found himself oscillating between being an Inverter and an Absolutist. In rare moments of complete frustration, he threw up his arms, like a Depleter, and said, “To ‘heck’ with it all!” Prioritizing is both a choice in each situation and a reflection of the structures in which the choice occurs whether at work or at home.

If you want something done right...

To get things done, Optimizer leaders understand and subdivide their authority constantly, but they never delegate their ultimate responsibility for what happens. The Optimizer’s credo may be, if you want something done right, you do it right. If that means the leader has to delegate, or direct, or do the task himself, the Optimizer decides and executes the action that best applies to the situation.

The Optimizer seeks to improve the quality of individual choice for the sake of a common collective understanding of right choice.

The efficient frontier is where both priorities are optimized given the risks at stake. Efficiency follows the right action. Alternatively, leaders should remember what Peter Drucker said: “There is surely nothing quite so useless as doing with great efficiency what should not be done at all.” When things get done inefficiently (below the frontier), the achievement involves friction and conflict. The drag force a leader feels is often the result of his organization’s inability to Get Along, not from seeking to Get it Right.

Practicing the Priorities

Building Teams that Get it Right and Get Along

Given the four types of prioritizers, what can you do to build an organization that Gets it Right and Gets Along? Leaders should be mindful of a variety of approaches to cultivating the priority choices of their teams.

Inverters are the most frequently observed type of prioritizers. A deficit of courage is usually present. Leaders can help Inverters overcome their tendency to choose Getting Along over Getting it Right in four ways: first, insist that the Inverter verifies results and actions before extending trust; second, check for fairness in the Inverter’s decisions; third, frequently review the Inverter’s performance to see how he or she is working through conflicts with others. Last (and most important), monitor the ethics practiced—and tempta-
Dealing with an Absolutist requires a more assertive approach. Since the Absolutist tends to have extreme judgments and opinions about people and objects, first restrict or limit his exercise of authority over others. This creates an opening for empathy and humility. Second, insist that the Absolutist respects others by listening in a non-patronizing, authentic way. Purposefully withholding his own views and truly listening is critical. Expect this particular step to take time and significant effort as well as require periodic check-ups. Third, require the Absolutist to explore alternative viewpoints and options before making decisions. And finally, seek reform. The Absolutist can change, but it often takes a direct, clear, unambiguous and repetitive approach that leaves no question about the extent of change required.

The Depleter is the least often observed but most destructive of all the prioritizers. My advice to leaders is often blunt in this regard: The majority of Depleters should be given very little time to change themselves. If verifiable progress is not made quickly, they must leave the organization before even greater damage is done. Leaders who recognize, reinforce and reward choices and behaviors of Optimizers build up strong and vibrant leaders and team members. Four fundamentals are needed to animate the priority choice to Get it Right and Get Along: knowledge, judgment, capacity and effort. Without these, the foundation is lacking for character and competence to flourish.

Knowledge means that the person Gets it Right because he or she has the experience in or expertise for what is required. Judgment means exercising that knowledge in the situation, in light of the risks, to make a good decision. To acquire knowledge and exercise judgment requires physical, emotional and cognitive capacity. This means that a person has the ability to see reality as it is and act in accordance with it if he so chooses. Finally, even if knowledge, judgment and capacity are present, Getting it Right also requires putting forth the effort necessary for excellence in the results and the relationships at stake.

The Optimizer leader seeks to identify, confront and contain four forces that disturb the team’s natural desire to Get Along. First, the leader’s intent is ambiguous to (or not understood by) followers. Second, excessive focus is placed on people’s feelings over facts (emotivism). As a result, the arbitrary nature of decision-making creates more conflict, and solid relationships fail to form. Third, social forces cause the person or group to conform instead of choosing healthy and fair relationships with others. And fourth, certain members treat others with disrespect and hostility, leading to injury and isolation among the group.

If the leader has the necessary skill to put the priorities of Getting it Right and Getting Along together, then...
The culture strengthens and thrives. Thoughtful, heated, respectful and highly constructive dialogue must be practiced. Leaders and teams build up the priorities of Getting it Right and Getting Along through four actions:

1. **INSPECT**: Aristotle said, “What is first in intention is last in execution.” Conduct “brief back” inspections. To ensure that the person really understands what you want done, ask the employee to tell you in her own words what you have asked or what is being expected. Misunderstandings related to Getting it Right clear up quickly with this simple inspection technique. Oh, I get what you mean! Brief backs cultivate the leader’s intent in followers. A good brief back provides clarity about what needs to be done and the parameters in which to act. Leaders should inspect and understand the thinking of their followers before actions begin. Initiative flourishes under these conditions.

2. **CHALLENGE**: From the insights gained through inspection, the Optimizer asks questions like: Are we Getting it Right by taking this action? Is there an even better right action? How much time do we have? What are the risks? Leaders increase the efficacy of the priorities when they ask the team what they think or understand about a particular challenge or problem at hand instead of telling them what they should do.

3. **CHOOSE/DECIDE**: Good challenge questions clarify the decision before the individuals and the team. Too often, people frame up the issue of Getting it Right as simply the choice between good and bad or right and wrong. Getting it Right usually fails because we are not making the best choice among good choices. Continuous improvement is sometimes used as an excuse for not seeking to Get it Right the first time.

4. **DISCLOSE**: We are all fallible. Admitting a mistake or disclosing an error is important to Getting it Right. The true effectiveness and ethics of any team finds traction in these moments of disclosure. A team can’t fix what it doesn’t understand is broken. Leaders encourage disclosure by their own examples and willingness to not cast blame.

**Keep your priorities straight**

Sound priorities sustain performance, reduce risk, and embed ethical power into decision making. Organizations that only *survive* tend to Get it Right with respect to what is good or bad; organizations that *thrive* go one step further because they Get it Right with respect to what is best. These successful organizations Get it Right because they Get Along, and their employees Get Along because they Get it Right.

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Endnotes

1. This critical statement is the product of numerous primary source interviews with leaders from corporate, academic and military settings. In particular, I am indebted to Drs. Blair Sheppard and Joe LeBeouf of the Fuqua School of Business at Duke University; General Charles Krulak, USMC; and the many other contributors who graciously agreed to be interviewed as part of our research (see the Priority Thinking book website at: http://www.priorityzone.com/book/Home/tabid/512/Default.aspx). Additional thanks to several business leaders, including my many clients who continually provided their views and understanding of the importance of both priorities.

2. This phenomenon occurs frequently in production systems; an inversion is when a lower priority blocks access to resources needed by a higher priority.

3. Kotter, Cohen, Schein and other contributors to the literature regarding organizational change argue convincingly that people tend to be hardwired to be resistant to change. However, I believe this approach invokes an ideological view that people put a priority on security over freedom. Russia under Putin is a modern example of this inversion. Kotter, for example, cites a “low tolerance for change” due to a feeling of security and stability in their work. Political theorists have explored the nature of change and human freedom and what people will and will not tolerate. There is a certain need for predictability in life that, naturally, opposes uncertainty. There is also a certain need for control in situations that creates resistance. Anarchy, in my view, is what people fear. Freedom is what they seek. Courage is what they need. I argue that people more often dislike disorder more than they do change.


5. Confidential sources in the top mortgage banking companies. Another example of “rocking the boat” occurs with Stock Analyst recommendations:

Brian Kennedy made the best call of his fledgling career when he slapped a ‘sell’ rating on shares of CardioNet Inc...Then, he quit his job...But for Kennedy, the call brought internal pressure and unexpected criticism. He found himself the subject of a complaint to the SEC brought by Jefferies lawyers while his research was being pummeled by competitors...Mr. Kennedy’s case is an example of the difficulty that analysts can face when their opinions on a stock are negative...Because of colleagues who make big fees keeping corporate clients happy...Mr. Kennedy said that other senior Jefferies analysts chided him for ‘rocking the boat.’ It was a hostile environment.”

6. The term “trust trap” was an organic outgrowth of our work on the essence of trust, independent of usage and meaning in other works. We then discovered this term had been coined previously, as in the following examples: Sorohan, Erica Gordon, “Corporate Integrity: Beware the Trust Trap,” Marketing Week, November 29, 2007; and Smith, Dennis, “Trust traps,” Training & Development, July 1994, or “Is your business plan actually a plan?” http://www.densmith.com/archives/business-planning/is-your-business-plan-actually-a-plan.html (accessed June 2, 2009).

7. The term “horizontal hostility” originated in the feminist movement. It was coined by Florence Kennedy in her 1970 paper, “Institutionalized Oppression vs. the Female,” which first appeared in Sisterhood is Powerful (Penelope Press, 1992). Since this inception, however, the term has spread to popular usage in the professions, particularly nursing. See for example, Bartholomew, Kathleen. Ending Nurse-to-Nurse Hostility. HCPro, Inc., 2006.

8. “Ethos” (éthōs), the Greek word for “custom,” is the character or attitude peculiar to a specific culture or group.

9. On February 4th, 2009, forensic accountant and private investigator Harry Markopolos provided riveting testimony on Capitol Hill of his repeated attempts to alert the Securities and Exchange Commission to the likely fraud underway in Bernie Madoff’s financial empire (As reported by Mary Thompson on CNBC, February 4, 2009, and numerous other news channels). As of 2014, Reuters estimated the actual loss by Madoff customer to be closer to $17.3B (see http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/20/us-jpmorgan-madoff-id)

10. Although the inspiration for this model came from portfolio theory, the efficient frontier also more closely reflects the concepts embedded in the micro-economic model of the Production Possibility Frontier (PPF) which identifies the different rates of production for producing two limited goods (resources) efficiently. My model advances the same points about inefficiency but with respect to the nature of choice as they occur in organizations and situations. In addition, portions of my model have been compared to the managerial grid which measures a person’s focus (or priority) on production versus people, developed by Robert Blake and Jane Mouton. What makes my model fundamentally different is that I juxtapose any core priority set against this prioritizer framework. “Getting it Right and Getting Along” has some similarities to the concepts in the Managerial Grid, which I find reassuring. But the other twenty-plus priority sets in our model do not.

11. This statement, “efficiency follows the right action” flows from our research on the priorities of effectiveness and efficiency. In our polling of clients across numerous industries and segments, lower performing organizations put a priority on efficiency, while higher performing organizations put a priority on effectiveness. The ethics of efficiency flow from this philosophy of work by Marie-Dominique Philippe who said that “efficiency only has meaning because of the work it produces. Efficiency alone, efficiency for itself, has no meaning.” It wears down the human person and destroys his dignity.