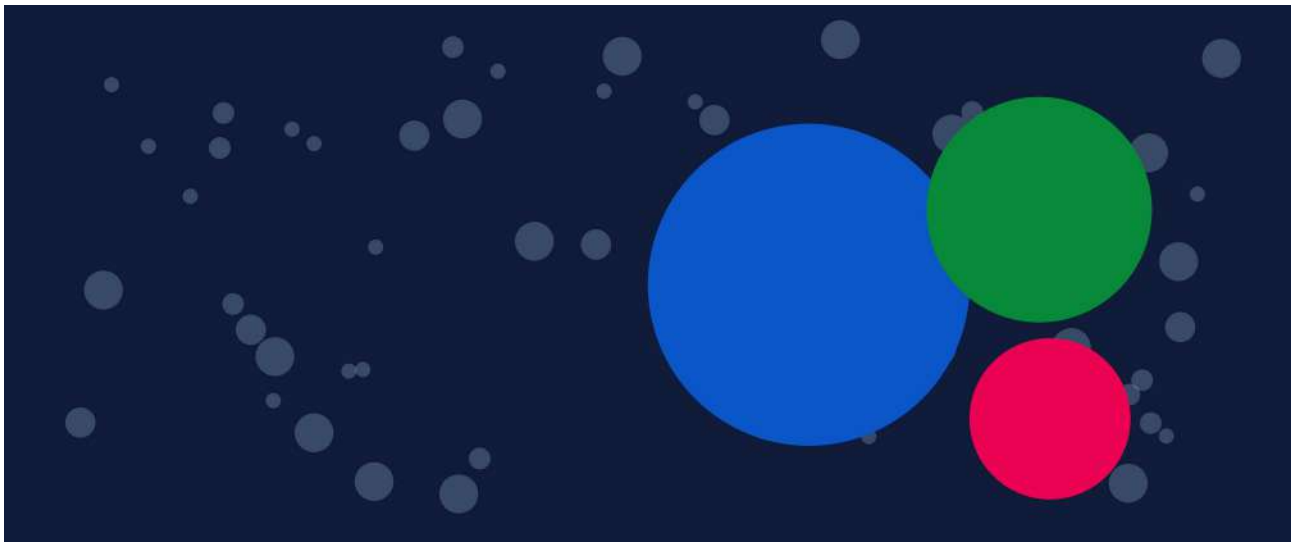
STRATEGY: Five Habits for Priorities that Deliver

Practical, evidence-informed steps for leaders, teams & the coaches who support them

By **Clare Beckett-McInroy MCC MP ACTC ESIA MCS CSS**



Most plans don't fail for lack of ideas. They fail because attention is scattered, assumptions go unexamined, the people doing the work aren't part of shaping it, intentions never become concrete actions, and nobody stops to learn along the way. The five habits below address each of these in turn. Each one is simple to describe, harder to practise, & backed by research that is worth knowing.

#	Habit	Key question
1	**Choose three clear priorities**	Which three would make the biggest difference?
2	**Challenge assumptions**	What are we treating as fact, & what evidence might change our thinking?
3	**Involve the people who will deliver it**	Whose perspectives do we need, & who is responsible for what?
4	**Turn priorities into action**	Who owns it, by when, & how will we measure it?
5	**Review & adapt**	What have we learned, & what will we adjust?

The five habits at a glance.

1. Choose three clear priorities

Too many priorities spread attention & resources thinly. Everything becomes urgent, so nothing gets finished well. In their work on strategy execution, McChesney, Covey & Huling (2012) argue that teams who focus on two or three goals, alongside the day-to-day “whirlwind”, can often achieve them, while teams that set many more tend to achieve only one or two. Focus is a structural choice, not a matter of willpower.

In practice: list everything competing for attention, then ask which three, if achieved, would make the biggest difference & make other things easier. Be explicit about what you are *not* doing for now. Saying no, or not yet, is part of the strategy.

> **Coaching questions:** If you could only achieve three things this year, which would matter most? What are you willing to put down to make space for them?

2. Challenge assumptions

Every plan rests on beliefs about the market, the team, the timeline & ourselves. Many of these are treated as facts. Overconfidence & the planning fallacy, our tendency to underestimate time, cost & risk, are well documented (Kahneman, 2011). One practical antidote is the *premortem*: imagine the plan has already failed, then work backwards to explain why. Framing it this way makes it easier for people to voice concerns they might otherwise keep to themselves (Klein, 2007).

In practice: for each priority, ask: what are we treating as fact? What evidence would change our thinking? Run a 20-minute premortem before you commit resources, & ask people to write their reasons independently before sharing.

> **Coaching questions:** What would have to be true for this plan to work? What evidence might change your mind? Imagine it’s a year from now & this didn’t work. What happened?

3. Involve the people who will deliver it

People commit more fully to decisions when they experience the process as fair. Kim & Mauborgne (1997) describe three elements of fair process: *engagement* (inviting input & challenge), *explanation* (sharing the reasoning behind final decisions) & *expectation clarity* (making the new responsibilities & standards clear). Inviting different perspectives also surfaces risks & ideas that a small planning group can miss, especially where people feel safe to speak up (Edmondson, 1999).

In practice: involve the people closest to the work before decisions are fixed. Explain what you decided & why, including which suggestions you didn’t take. Then make roles & responsibilities explicit, so nobody has to guess.

> **Coaching questions:** Whose voice is missing from this plan? How will people know why these choices were made? Who is responsible for what, & do they know it?

4. Turn priorities into action

A priority without an owner, a deadline & a measure is a hope. Doran’s (1981) S.M.A.R.T. criteria remain a useful check: specific, measurable, assignable, realistic & time-related. Research on

implementation intentions adds a further step. Deciding in advance when, where & how you will act, in an "if–then" form, makes it more likely that goals are followed through (Gollwitzer, 1999).

In practice: give each priority one named owner, a timescale & a measurable outcome. Agree the first concrete step & when it will happen. Make the measures visible, so progress (or the lack of it) is easy to see.

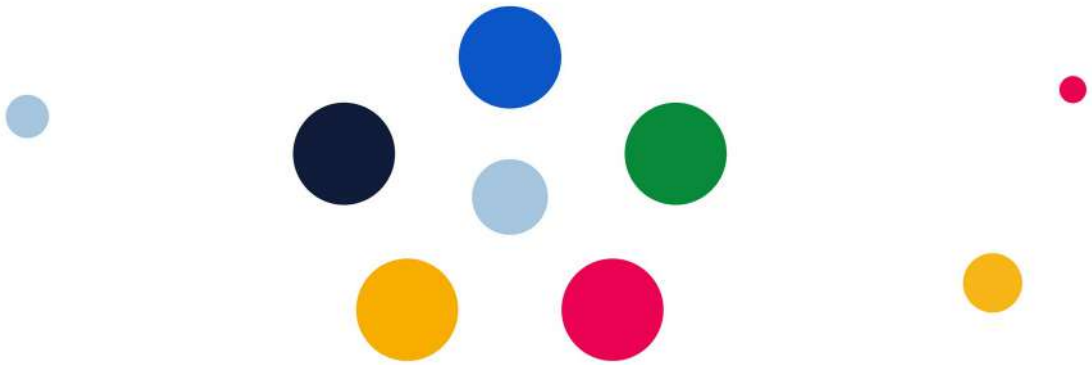
> **Coaching questions:** Who owns this? What will be different, & how will you measure it? What's the very next step, & when exactly will it happen?

5. Review & adapt

Plans meet reality, & reality changes. Learning comes from cycling between experience, reflection, sense-making & new action (Kolb, 1984). McChesney, Covey & Huling (2012) call this a *cadence of accountability*: short, regular check-ins focused only on the priorities, where people report on commitments, review the measures & agree what comes next.

In practice: hold brief, regular check-ins, weekly or fortnightly, with three questions: what did we commit to, what happened, & what will we do next? Treat surprises as data. Be willing to adjust the plan, or to replace a priority that no longer earns its place.

> **Coaching questions:** What have you learned since you set this priority? What are you noticing that you didn't expect? What would you change, stop or start?



Bringing it together

These five habits work best as a cycle rather than a checklist. Focus creates space. Challenging assumptions strengthens the plan. Involving people builds commitment & insight. Clear actions turn intent into progress. Regular review keeps the whole system learning. As a coach, a leader or a team, you don't need all five to be perfect. Choose one to strengthen this month, & notice what changes.

References

Doran, G.T. (1981) 'There's a S.M.A.R.T. way to write management's goals and objectives', *Management Review*, 70(11), pp. 35–36.

Edmondson, A. (1999) 'Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), pp. 350–383.

Gollwitzer, P.M. (1999) 'Implementation intentions: strong effects of simple plans', *American Psychologist*, 54(7), pp. 493–503.

Kahneman, D. (2011) *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Kim, W.C. & Mauborgne, R. (1997) 'Fair process: managing in the knowledge economy', *Harvard Business Review*, 75(4), pp. 65–75.

Klein, G. (2007) 'Performing a project premortem', *Harvard Business Review*, 85(9), pp. 18–19.

Kolb, D.A. (1984) *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

McChesney, C., Covey, S. & Huling, J. (2012) *The 4 Disciplines of Execution: Achieving Your Wildly Important Goals*. New York: Free Press.