

How Strong Leaders Decide What Not to Take On



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One thing I've noticed over the years is that the best Regulatory and Quality leaders don't necessarily have fewer priorities than everyone else. If anything, they usually have more.

A submission is moving toward a deadline. An inspection is on the horizon. Commercial teams need answers. Product development keeps moving. Someone wants to launch a new system. Someone else thinks it's the right time to rewrite procedures or reorganize responsibilities.

Most of it makes sense. The problem is that it all arrives at the same time.

I was talking with a VP of Quality not long ago who walked me through everything on his team's plate. By the end of the conversation, I counted eight major initiatives. I asked him which one mattered most.

He laughed. "That's the problem," he said. "They're all important."

A week later we spoke again. He'd met with his leadership team and made a different decision. Instead of trying to move eight projects forward, they agreed to focus on three. The others weren't cancelled. They were simply pushed back until the work in front of them was finished.

His comment stuck with me. "I finally realized we weren't short on ideas. We were short on capacity."

I think that's a realization a lot of leaders eventually come to. I've seen

organizations spend months trying to improve everything at once, only to find themselves making very little progress anywhere. Every project gets a little attention, but nothing actually crosses the finish line.

Then I see other companies make a different choice. They protect the work that's tied to the company's next milestone. Maybe that's getting a submission out the door. Maybe it's preparing for an inspection. Maybe it's supporting a product launch without creating unnecessary risk. Everything else waits. Not because it isn't valuable. Because right now it isn't the most important thing.

That isn't always an easy conversation. It sometimes means telling another department they'll have to wait. It sometimes means explaining to executive leadership why a worthwhile project needs to start next quarter instead of next week. Those conversations can be uncomfortable. But they're often what allows the team to deliver on the commitments that matter most.

One pattern I keep seeing is that organizations don't usually struggle because they have too few good ideas. They struggle because every good idea becomes an immediate priority. The leaders who consistently move their companies forward know the difference.

They aren't saying "no."

They're saying, "Not yet."

And in many cases, that's one of the most important leadership decisions they make.