# Prioritization Slides That Persuade

## Idea In Short

Build prioritization slides last, not first. Do the analytical work, form a point of view, circulate ideas before the meeting and make the decision criteria explicit. Then sequence initiatives into first, second, third and skip. Clients drowning in half-finished projects need fewer, better choices.

## Simple Slides, Heavy Lifting

Prioritization slides usually arrive at the end of a performance improvement presentation, built to narrow the choices. They look almost simplistic, which is both their strength and their weakness. Simple is good, because executives decide faster with clear options. The danger is that a credible ranking demands context, qualitative judgment and trust. The literal answer is a framework, table or ranking system for comparing options, no different from comparing laptops on a retailer's website. The honest answer is that practice varies enormously by firm, senior manager and personality. What follows is one practitioner's take.

## Do the Work First

Long before slide making begins, several ingredients must be right. Ask the right questions and find creative ways to dig up data worth analyzing. Consider the audience's appetite for risk, their timeframe, budget and ambition. Form your own point of view, since clients pay for judgment rather than a summary of facts. Scaffold the problem with hypotheses, logical structure and a clear one-two-three sequence. Then circulate the ideas ahead of the meeting. The Japanese practice of nemawashi, laying the groundwork quietly before a formal decision, keeps initiatives from dying on arrival.1

## Refine Data Into Insight

A strong prioritization slide presupposes that you sit far down the thinking food chain. You have been digging in the right places and refining information toward an insight, the moment a client says "ah ha." This is where consulting value gets created. A battery of questions drives the refinement. What are the 20 percent of inputs driving 80 percent of outputs, the core of the Pareto principle?2 Does a framework characterize the information cleanly? Can you point the client's attention to something specific? What are the natural buckets, revenue drivers versus cost drivers or long-term versus short-term? What is the current trend and its likely future impact? What benefit level breaks even within 24 months? What was the distribution of results, and why? Which analyses come next, and why did you choose this one among hundreds of alternatives? Every answer must survive the final question: so what?

## Make the Decision Easy

Any consulting project surfaces a flood of interviews, discussions, ideas and opportunities. Recommending all of them at once is foolish. The job is sequencing: first, second, third and do not bother. Clients deserve to see the machinery behind the ranking. Name the one thing that definitely must happen and what finishing it requires. State the criteria explicitly. Importance in what way, risk in what way, payoff measured how and resources meaning what? Show whether the ranking rests on data about cost and duration or on judgment, and say whose input shaped it, whether subject-matter experts, published data, the client or your own experience. Explain how you will visualize 15 initiatives without chaos. Surface the assumptions and identify what would have to change for the sequence to change. The ranking must reflect the client's goals, risk tolerance and capacity to execute, always.

Real examples show the range. One Deloitte risk assessment mapped 60 risk types rated on impact, likelihood, vulnerability and speed of onset, then plotted two variables on an X-Y chart.3 Ambitious, and frankly too busy. A simpler Deloitte two-by-two mapped net value against realization risk, yet both axes sounded vague. When a chart claims back-office offshoring scores 5.5 on realization risk and 4.2 on net value, the audience deserves the data behind the dots. Unexplained precision damages credibility faster than honest approximation.

## Attach Implementation Detail

Prioritization tells clients what to choose. Implementation detail makes the choice doable, and it quietly drafts the statement of work for phase two. Work backwards from the major milestones and deliverables. Decide whether the client needs a project plan or a 30-page document with specific checklists. Estimate duration and clarify who does the work, client staff or consultants. Map dependencies and external factors, the territory covered by Suppliers, Inputs, Process, Outputs, Customers (SIPOC) analysis. Study what kinds of projects the client has completed successfully before. Design the governance structure, including who sits on the steering group and how often it meets. Document key assumptions and risks along with mitigations. Detail at this level converts a pretty matrix into an executable plan.

## Presenting the Slide Itself

The delivery moment deserves its own craft. Open with the recommendation rather than the methodology, because executives decide faster when the answer leads. State the top priority in one sentence, then show the ranking, then offer the criteria for anyone who wants to inspect the machinery. Expect challenge on the second and third items more than the first, since audiences test rankings at their margins. When a senior stakeholder disagrees with a placement, treat it as data rather than resistance, because their private knowledge of politics and capacity often improves the sequence. Leave the meeting with explicit ownership of the top item, a named sponsor and a date, or the slide becomes decoration. A prioritization slide succeeds when the room stops debating the list and starts assigning the work.

## Be Picky, Then Encourage

Too many companies attempt everything and end up with a wake of half-finished projects and exhausted employees. Time is the only resource money cannot buy, so be picky on the client's behalf. Then stay for the hard part. Change is difficult, and without an external coach, conscience, instigator or consigliere, things do not get done. Internal consultants know the lament that it is hard to be a prophet in your own hometown. Personal trainers exist for the same reason, since good fitness advice is plentiful and unused. Get your clients to the metaphorical gym, and keep them going.

- 1Nemawashi
- 2Pareto principle
- 3Deloitte Insights

## Summary

Prioritization slides compress weeks of analysis into a decision. Earn them through rigorous work, explicit criteria and pre-socialized ideas. Sequence ruthlessly, attach implementation detail and coach the client through execution. Time is the one resource nobody can buy, so help clients spend it well.