Center for
Strategy &
Leadership

26. Fruits & Nuts Matrix

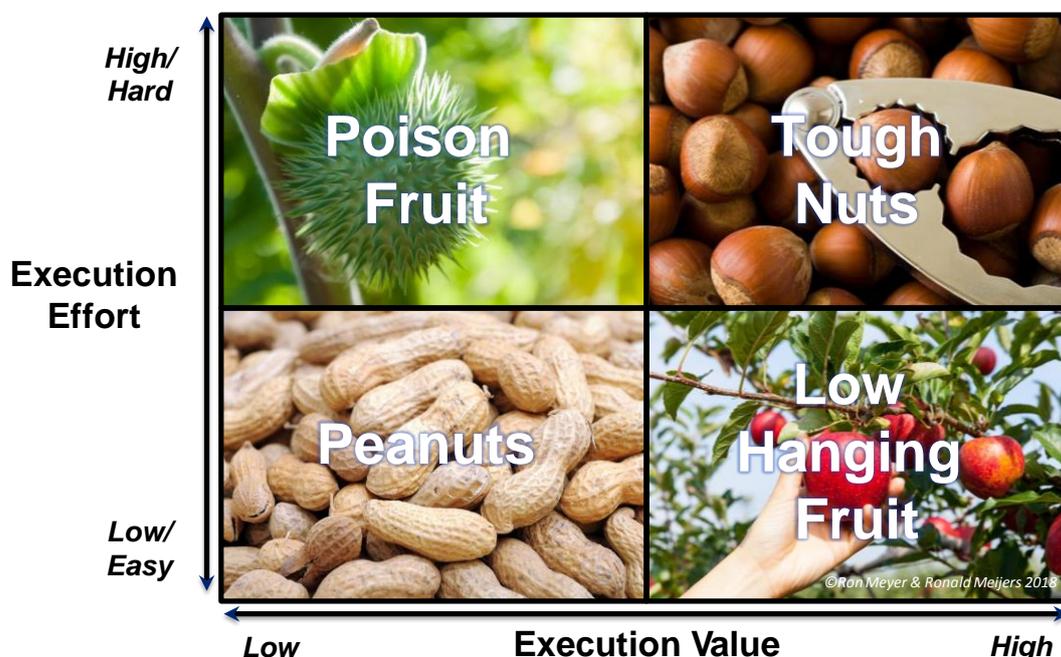*How can I determine which activities should be my priorities?*

Key Definitions

There is always more work than resources. Whether as an individual, team or organization, there is never a shortage of activities that need to be completed or new initiatives that could be started to improve performance, but there is constantly a shortage of money, capabilities, time, and attention that can be allocated to these tasks.

Therefore, people need to set priorities, determining which activities to carry out first, instead of just starting somewhere and seeing when their resources run out. For teams and organizations this *hierarchy of priorities* needs to be shared to optimize joint resource usage.

Conceptual Model

The *Fruits & Nuts Matrix* is a framework for mapping all desired activities and then determining which should be tackled in which order. Each potential activity needs to be evaluated along two dimensions, execution value and execution effort, after which a roadmap can be drawn up, prioritizing items close to the bottom right-hand corner and pushing back activities closer to the top left. What distinguishes this tool from other priority-setting methods is that it looks beyond potential value ('an action has a high *return on investment*') as the only decision-making criterion, adding potential executability ('an action is highly *feasible* and *acceptable*') as an equally compelling criterion to prioritize activities.

High/ Hard — **Poison Fruit** — **Tough Nuts**

Execution Effort

Peanuts — **Low Hanging Fruit**

Low/ Easy

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Low — **Execution Value** — *High*

Key Elements

The two axes of the matrix are the following:

1. **Execution Value**. Every potential activity needs to be judged on its likely 'return on investment' (added value) if carried out. This means that expected benefits ('returns') need

to be estimated, which can range from financial results to brand enhancement, operational efficiency, stronger engagement and increased confidence. At the same time, the necessary resource investments also need to be assessed, including all required money, time and attention. Taking these returns and investments together, the added value of each activity can be determined, either as a hard number or as a qualitative guestimate. It also works to simply rank all activities from low to high value, spreading them along the x-axis.

2. **Execution Effort**. Yet, potential value needs to be realized. Implementation is key. Unfortunately, fantastic initiatives often get bogged down in everyday realities. Sometimes activities get stuck because they are practically difficult to pull off ('feasibility'), due to legacy systems, insufficient skills and/or an inability to learn more quickly. But activities can also suffer from insufficient support by key stakeholders ('acceptability') who don't understand or don't agree (see model 1, the *Mind the Gap Model*). Estimating the execution effort can be done quantitatively or qualitatively, but here too it can be useful to simply rank all activities from low to high and spread them along the Y-axis.

Based on these two axes there are four matrix quadrants:

I. **Low Hanging Fruit.** Generally, the easy, high value activities should be done first, not only for their own sake, but to build confidence and momentum in getting things done.

II. **Tough Nuts.** After the low hanging fruit, attention will need to shift to the more difficult, high value activities, which usually take longer to crack.

III. **Peanuts**. To sustain confidence and momentum after realizing the low hanging fruit, it makes sense to blend some easier, lower value peanuts into the nut mix.

IV. **Poison Fruit**. These difficult, low value activities might look tasty to the unsuspicious eye, but need to be pushed back in time, or even off the agenda altogether.

Key Insights

- **Prioritizing is about selecting the best order**. You can't do everything and certainly not all at the same time. Therefore, you need to rank potential activities from most to least attractive, determining which to do first and how many can be done at all. This is the essence of prioritizing, and it is necessary for both individuals and groups of people.

- **Prioritizing activities is about investing scarce resources.** It is commonly heard you should prioritize that which is important and urgent. But this refers to prioritizing issues, on which you want to focus *scarce attention*. Prioritizing activities is a different matter, as it more broadly involves focusing *scarce resources* (attention, time, capabilities, and money). Prioritizing activities is about where to invest first, not where to pay attention first.

- **Prioritizing activities requires estimating value and effort**. It makes sense to invest first in the activities with the highest value (return on investment). But it is equally important to prefer activities that require the least effort (feasible and acceptable). Easy-to-execute activities are attractive in their own right but are particularly useful for building execution self-confidence and sustaining change momentum ('keeping the ball rolling').

- **Prioritizing activities is about relative position**. An activity is always a priority compared to something else. Therefore, the Fruits & Nuts Matrix works best when activities are ranked vis-à-vis one another, instead of trying to quantify an absolute score for each axis.

- **Prioritizing activities should be done together**. As tool, the matrix is particularly useful to help teams prioritize activities together, by structuring the discussion on value and effort, making assumptions more explicit. Once all potential activities are jointly mapped, the team can agree on a final order in which to execute. It is sensible to draw up a roadmap from bottom right to top left, but the matrix doesn't suggest any fixed order.

Meyer's Management Models
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Publication Schedule

July 2019	*Mind the Gap Model*	*Change Management*
August 2019	*Digital Platform Map*	*Digital Strategy*
September 2019	*Interaction Pressure Gauge*	*Interpersonal Interaction*
October 2019	*Revenue Model Framework*	*Revenue Model Typology*
November 2019	*House of Engagement*	*Organizational Engagement*
December 2019	*Confidence Quotient*	*Trust Building*
January 2020	*Competition Tornado*	*Competitive Strategy*
February 2020	*11C Synergy Model*	*Corporate Synergy Management*
March 2020	*Leadership Fairness Model*	*Leader-Follower Interaction*
April 2020	*Strategic Agility Model*	*Strategy Process Approach*
May 2020	*Control Panel*	*Corporate Control Dimensions*
June 2020	*Rising Star Framework*	*Talent Management*
July 2020	*Strategy Development Cycle*	*Strategy Process Steps*
August 2020	*7I Roles of the Corporate Center*	*Corporate Organization*
September 2020	*Storytelling Scripts*	*Leadership Communication*
October 2020	*Strategic Bets Framework*	*Strategic Decision-Making*
November 2020	*Rebound Model of Resilience*	*Organizational Resilience*
December 2020	*4C Leadership Capabilities*	*Leadership Competences*
January 2021	*Digital Product Model Dial*	*Digital Strategy*
February 2021	*Digital Distribution Model Dial*	*Digital Strategy*
March 2021	*Empowerment Cycle*	*Employee Empowerment*
April 2021	*Innovation Box*	*Innovation Approaches*
May 2021	*Knowledge Sharing Bridges*	*Best Practice Sharing*
June 2021	*Followership Cycle*	*Leader-Follower Interaction*
July 2021	*Everest Model of Change*	*Change Management*
August 2021	*Fruits & Nuts Matrix*	*Priority-Setting*
September 2021	Powerhouse Model	People & Organization Strategy
October 2021	Strategy Hourglass	Strategy Process Timing
November 2021	Deft Dialogue Model	Interpersonal Communication
December 2021	New Pyramid Principle	Presentation Approaches
January 2022	Corporate Value Creation Model	Corporate Level Strategy
February 2022	Team-Building Cycle	Team-Building Process
March 2022	Embedded Identity Model	Personal Awareness
April 2022	Customer-Centricity Circle	Organizational Design
May 2022	Partnership Distance Model	Interorganizational Relations