

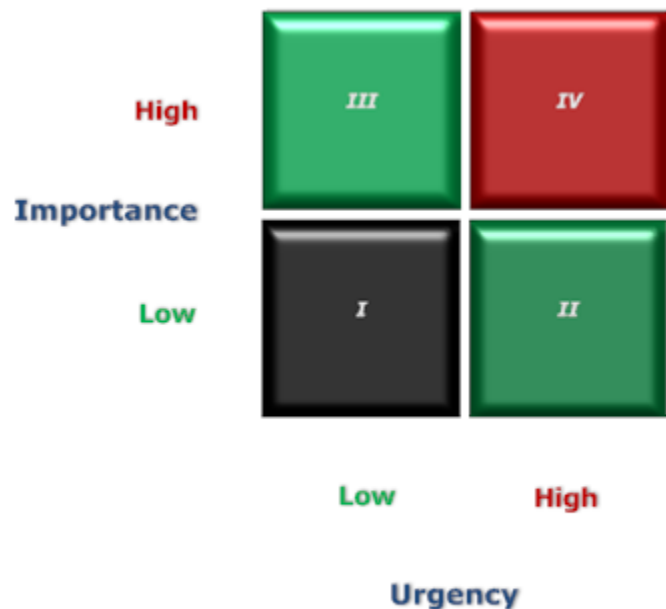
The Urgent Should Displace the Important

Published August 20 2009 11:13 AM

Layoffs and job losses in recent times have resulted in a significant – some might say *punishing* – increase in the workload facing many working people. Millions of people have lost their jobs but their work didn't leave with them. People still on the payroll find themselves picking up that burden. Some people have an almost bewildering array of tasks, assignments, projects and other challenges facing them. The order in which to tackle them is a key decision. And so we ask ourselves: Do I succumb to time pressures and let the urgent rule the day or do I take that so-called "proactive" stance and tend to the important things first?

You've no doubt heard it said that the important gives way to the urgent, that the urgent crowds out the important, or other words to that effect. Such comments often precede an admonishment to retain your focus on the important and to not succumb to the pressures of the urgent. Well, for what it's worth, I think that is probably well-intentioned advice but I also think it's wide of the mark. The urgent *should* take priority over the important. In this post, I'll demonstrate why.

Most discussions about urgent versus important seem to assume that urgent and important are two completely different things and thus there are trade-offs to be made between them. This is not the case. Urgency and importance are inseparable; they are two dimensions of the tasks facing you. Every task, assignment, project or challenge you face has an element of urgency and an element of importance. Consider the grid below:



© Fred Nickols 2008

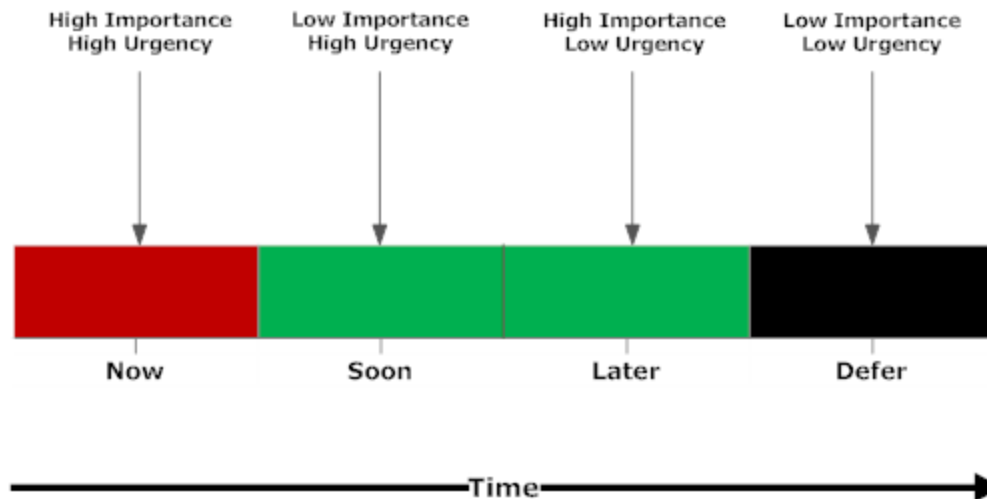
The grid has two axes: urgency and importance. Both range from low to high thus yielding the four quadrants in the grid:

- I - Low importance, low urgency
- II - Low importance, high urgency
- III - High importance, low urgency
- IV - High importance, high urgency

One important question we have to ask ourselves in relation to the mix of work facing us is this: "When should I tend to this?"

There is, then, a scheduling, sequencing or timing problem. Time, of course, is a continuum and, in general terms, we can choose to do things now, soon, later or we can simply defer them to some unspecified point in the future (see the timeline below).

Importance & Urgency Timeline



The grid presented earlier not only accommodates this view of time, it also suggests the general slotting of the tasks illustrated on the timeline above (see the items below):

- If it's low importance and low urgency, defer it; don't waste time on it. Here's your chance to procrastinate and feel good about it.
- If it's low importance and high urgency, schedule it for sometime soon; after all, it is urgent but it's not particularly important so you do have to get to it soon but not right away.
- If it's high importance and low urgency, schedule it for sometime later; true, it is important but it is not so urgent that you don't have some leeway in terms of when to schedule it.
- If it's high urgency and high importance, do it now! There's no excuse to delay.

As you can see from the illustrations above, the urgent does indeed displace the important – but only in terms of scheduling – and in that context the displacement is appropriate.

If you were to prioritize on the basis of importance only, the order of the middle two items on the timeline above would be reversed; a highly urgent item would move from "Soon" to "Later" displaced by a highly important item that could in fact be scheduled for later. The result of this misplaced emphasis on importance only is that fires which should be put out will continue to burn and they might spread. In other words, the consequence of not tending to highly urgent issues that are relatively unimportant is that you wind up increasing their urgency and their importance.

Suppose the staff in a software development shop is working on a new version of its flagship software and it is also charged with fixing bugs with the existing version. Developing the new version is viewed as extremely important. Fixing the bugs in the current version is seen as much less important. However, the new release isn't scheduled to be released for several months and

the bugs need to be fixed in a prompt fashion. If they're not, customer dissatisfaction levels might rise, perhaps jeopardizing the success of the new version.

So, the next time someone asks you if you're letting the urgent displace the important, nod, smile and say, "That is as it should be."

***About the Author:** My name is Fred Nickols. I am a writer, an independent consultant and a former executive. Visual aids of one kind or another have played a central role in my work for many years. My goals in writing for SmartDraw's Working Smarter blog are to: (1) provide you with some first-rate content you can't get anywhere else, (2) illustrate how important good visuals can be in communicating such content and (3) illustrate also the critical role visuals can play in solving the kinds of problems we encounter in the workplace. I encourage you to comment on my posts and to contact me directly if you want to pursue a more in-depth discussion. My web site is at www.nickols.us and you can email me at fred@nickols.us.*

