Stephen Coveys’ Quadrants: How to use your time effectively

We’re all able to make ‘To Do’ lists and most people work from such lists, ticking off jobs as they go along. But do we really know how to prioritise our time effectively? Are we wasting valuable time doing things that aren’t so important, and then getting stressed when time runs out and we realise we’ve missed something urgent?

How do we get it right when there is so much to do and so little time to do it? The Activity Matrix first introduced by Covey and Merrill is an excellent tool to use to help prioritise your time:

The Activity Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 Urgent and Important</th>
<th>2 Not Urgent But Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 Urgent But Not Important</td>
<td>4 Not Urgent And Not Important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Important or Urgent?**

**Important** – This is results-orientated.
If something is important, it contributes to personal goals and values.

**Urgent** – This is action-orientated.
If something is urgent it has the appearance of requiring my immediate attention.

**Urgent and Important: Quadrant 1**
The issues in this Quadrant MUST be dealt with, such as:

- Dealing with an irate customer on the phone
- Meeting a critical deadline
- Getting a server back up and running.

This Quadrant is the **Quadrant of Action**, where we react and fire-fight. It’s where we bring our skills, knowledge and experience to bear on situations that challenge us.

Many people spend too little time in this Quadrant, even though they THINK they are in it. They see situations that are Urgent the same as situations that are Important and thus are continually busy and run the risk of burn-out.

**Not Urgent but Important: Quadrant 2**
Some people don’t spend enough time in this Quadrant because they don’t always recognise what is Important until it either becomes Urgent or it is too late.

This is the **Quadrant of Personal Control** where we should be organising our life. Some would call it ‘Quality Time’ and it includes such things as:

- Making and maintaining relationships in all areas of our lives, such as work, family, social, etc.
- Long-term planning, such as professional development, career planning, retirement planning, etc
- Looking after our health, exercise and recreation.
There is a risk that this Quadrant isn’t given the attention it deserves simply because it isn’t ‘pressuring’ us. We may take things for granted or think there will always be time for that tomorrow, or next week, or next month or next year. There are no guarantees in life.

**Urgent but Not Important: Quadrant 3**

This is where we respond to others and their panic and pressure, where Urgency creates the illusion of Importance. Welcome to the *Quadrant of Deception*. The activities in this Quadrant tend to be those that contribute to their goals, not yours, and are therefore more important to someone else. Phone calls, meetings and dealing with unannounced visitors are typical activities in this Quadrant.

A decision needs to be made!

- If these other people are important to YOU, then what is important to them can become important to you and you move to Quadrant 1
- If not, ask if it can be done later, and move to Quadrant 2
- If not, ask if someone else might be better placed to do it.

People unwittingly spend a lot of time in this Quadrant, spending a lot of time and effort trying to meet other people’s priorities and expectations whether they are important or not.

**Not Urgent and Not Important: Quadrant 4**

This is the *Quadrant of Waste*.

If we are actively managing our time we shouldn’t be here at all. Here, we are filling our time with activities that aren’t Urgent – they don’t need to be done now – and they aren’t Important – they don’t contribute to our goals.

Typical Quadrant 4 activities are watching mindless TV and channel hopping, gossiping, surfing for nothing in particular, doing anything other than what should be done!

These are not leisure activities (which are usually planned and therefore in Quadrant 2) but sloth and general deterioration. This is where the ‘Couch Potatoes’ are found.

**Plan the Important**

When managing our time, we often address the Urgent matters but neglect to plan the Important matters. If we neglect to plan the Important, everything will at some point become Urgent and we end up prioritising the crisis that is the ‘most urgent’.

Planning is the key. Start by deciding what is Urgent and what is Important, then prioritise your list for the day/week/month.

It’s really important to keep lists to a manageable length so that you don’t get overwhelmed. Try not to have more than 12 items each day; and if your list is large, chunk it down into groups of three, prioritised according to your quadrants. Deciding to do three things from a list not only serves to motivate you when they are achieved but also makes the list and ‘to do’s’ a lot more manageable.

Most importantly, recognise **you are not a superhero** and can only do so much in one day. Delegation, assertiveness and being realistic are crucial when managing your time effectively.