

The Eisenhower Box

(“Urgent vs Important” Priority-Management Matrix)



“The things that are urgent are seldom important and the things that are important are seldom urgent.” –President Eisenhower

This concept was made popular in Stephen Covey’s book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*—in the “Put First Things First” chapter. The big idea is to figure out what is important and to be deliberate about scheduling and protecting those things so that they are not crowded out by the urgent.

The “Urgent vs Important” quad chart helps to visualize this.

Quadrants I and III: Tyranny of the Urgent. We have a finite amount of time, and we have a never-ending supply of urgent things to do—a pressing deadline, the latest crisis, the voicemail from the boss’ staff asking for data they need *right now*, an upset teammate, a last-minute meeting, etc.

We need to manage these things, for sure, and some urgent tasks are also important (Q I). But, as Covey writes, “The noise of urgency creates the illusion of importance.” We lose sight of the difference between Q I and Q III, and that is dangerous. If we aren’t careful, we get addicted to urgency and the adrenaline that can come with it. We begin to fall prey to what Charles Hummel called “tyranny of the urgent!” The urgent begins to dominate our organizations at the expense of important activities that can be pushed off to some future date. The more we live in “react mode,” the more our planning skills and calendar discipline atrophy.

Quadrant II (Important and Not Urgent): These are activities that will have a significant positive impact on the organization but aren’t pressing in the moment. If you don’t do them, you won’t feel an immediate impact, which creates the illusion that it is ok not to do them. Examples include: strategic planning, deep thinking, after action reviews (AARs), relationship and team building, professional development and learning, counseling, physical exercise, daily reflective practices, and restorative rest.

Covey writes:

The degree to which urgency drives the organization is the degree to which importance does not. This is not to suggest that there is no urgency. Quadrant I is very real, and a good percentage of time should be spent doing things that are both urgent and important. But **so much time is wasted in Quadrant III because importance isn’t clear!** [Emphasis added]

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	Q I	Q II
NOT IMPORTANT	Q III	Q IV



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In Covey's research, he found high-performing organizations spend well over half of their time in Quadrant II, while typical organizations spend around 15% in Quadrant II and over half their time in Quadrant III. **Where are you and your team spending most of your time?**

What to do?

"Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of the things which matter least."
–Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

To live predominantly in Quadrant II requires leaders to first be very clear on what is truly important. These leaders take a long-term view, are intentional and proactive, and take disciplined action to schedule, protect, and relentlessly deliver on the things that matter most.

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	Q I (Urgent & Important) Take Action & Manage	Q II (Important/Not Urgent) Schedule & Protect
Not Important	Q III (Urgent/Not Important) Mitigate	Q IV (Not Important or Urgent) Eliminate

One idea to consider is creating some structure (think "mechanism with teeth") that generates positive pressure on a Q II item, pulling it into Q I. Publicizing results, imposing a deadline, and leaders taking interest for example. Without changing the underlying structure of an urgent-dominated culture, it will be extremely difficult to consistently achieve Quadrant II priorities.

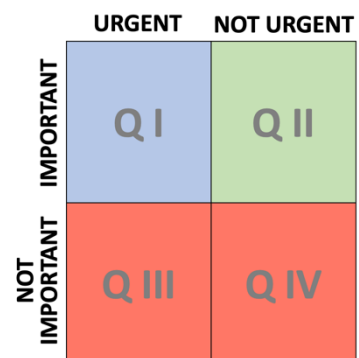
And leaders that prioritize Quadrant II learn to say "No" to things that would prevent them from achieving the things that matter most.

A senior leader we know has the quad chart on his office wall, with specific tasks listed in each quadrant. When someone comes in with his hair on fire about the latest urgent issue, the leader calmly turns around and looks at the chart and asks, "Where do you see that fitting on the chart?" He is deeply devoted to mission excellence, and he visualizes the organization in an all-out battle between Q II (the path to meaningful, long-term mission excellence) and all the urgent things dragging them into shallow mediocrity.



Exercise to Help Put the Eisenhower Box into Practice¹

1. Priorities Audit. Review the last several weeks and list out all the things that you and your team spend time on. Then categorize them into the different quadrants and estimate the % of work time you are spending in each quadrant.



2. What Quadrant II activities you are currently shortchanging?

Brainstorm with your team to identify the possibilities—things that matter but which you often do not have time for. Then, hone the list down to one or two especially high-impact ideas and consider what it will take to deliver on them.

Stephen Covey asks: “If you were to start doing one thing in your professional work that you know would have enormously positive effects on the results, what would it be?”

Figuring out your Quadrant II activities (and doing them) will have a positive impact. But doing so will likely require you and your team to stop doing, or change how you are doing, other things.

3. Develop your “stop doing” list. Starting with your Quadrant III activities, decide what you will deliberately stop doing. Remember that “the noise of urgency creates the illusion of importance,” so this can be challenging. It is also the only way you will create bandwidth to do what matters most. *Communicate and do not leave it to chance that people understand why you are doing this.*

4. Review Quadrant I activities. Is there an activity that is both urgent and important that takes up a lot of your time? Are there ways you could be more efficient and proactive? For example: plan better, do earlier, routinize aspects, delegate, or outsource elements to create bandwidth for more Quadrant II priorities.

¹ This exercise is designed to do with your team. Read the article and then work through these prompts together.

