

Strategies for Managing Priorities

Urgent and Important - Strategy is to Manage important goals

There are two distinct types of urgent and important activities: ones that you could not foresee, and others that you have left to the last minute. You can avoid the latter by planning ahead and not postponing the task. Issues and crises, on the other hand, cannot always be foreseen or avoided. Here, the best approach is to leave some time in your schedule to handle unexpected issues and unplanned important activities. If a major crisis arises, some other activity may have to be rescheduled. If this happens, identify which of your urgent-important activities could have been foreseen and think about how you could schedule similar activities ahead of time so they do not become urgent.

Not Urgent, but Important - Strategy is to focus on critical activities

These are the activities that help you achieve your personal and professional goals, and complete important work. Make sure that you have plenty of time to do these things properly, so that they do not become urgent. And remember to leave enough time in your schedule to deal with unforeseen problems. This will maximize your chances of keeping on schedule, and help you avoid the stress of work becoming more urgent than necessary.

Urgent and Not Important - Strategy is to say no to distractions

Urgent but not important activities are things that stop you achieving your goals, and prevent you from completing your work. Ask yourself whether these tasks can be rescheduled, or whether someone else could do them. A common source of such interruptions is from other people in your office. Sometimes it's appropriate to say "No" to people, or encourage them to solve the problem themselves. Alternatively, try allocating time when you are available so that people only interrupt you at certain times (a good way of doing this is to schedule a regular meeting so that all issues can be dealt with at the same time.) By doing this, you'll be able to concentrate on your important activities for longer periods of time.

Not Urgent and Not Important - Strategy is to avoid interruptions

These activities are just a distraction, and should be avoided if possible. Some can simply be ignored. Others are activities that other people may want you to do, but they do not contribute to your own desired outcomes. Again, say "No" politely and firmly if you can. If people see you are clear about your objectives and boundaries, they will often not ask you to do unimportant activities in the future.

Managing Priorities

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	Manage... important goals	Focus... on critical activities
	Quadrant of necessity	Quadrant of quality and personal leadership
Unimportant	Say no... to distractions	Avoid... interruptions
	Quadrant of deception	Quadrant of waste

Scheduling your Work - some tips

By using the Important Urgent Matrix, you can identify what needs to be done and the priorities over a given period e.g. a week or a month. Your overall aim is to increase the time you spend in the Quadrant of Quality and Personal Leadership, the critical activities which are important but not yet urgent. As a people manager, most of the activities involved in leading and managing staff sit in this quadrant. However, when something unexpected happens e.g. there is a performance or disciplinary issue, you will be working in the Important and Urgent Quadrant of Necessity.

The next step is to decide what percentage of your week in total should be allocated to the activities in the Quadrant of Quality. In other words, how much time should you leave for the unpredictable emergencies and for the Urgent / Not Important interruptions? For most of us we should be aiming for at least 70% of our week devoted to the Quadrant of Quality.

However, in some roles, there will be a higher percentage of time spent in the Quadrant of Necessity, for core activities that you know are likely to happen, but you cannot predict when they will occur. For example, as a midwife you may know that on average you are called out in the night twice a month. So, you need to allow time in your schedule to accommodate these activities, and this may involve reducing the percentage of time you plan to spend in the Quadrant of Quality.

The next step is to schedule your work to ensure that, in practice, you focus on the critical activities. Here are some ideas - which others have found useful.

Working out the Tasks in the Critical Activities

For each priority activity a good starting point is to clarify for yourself precisely what you need to achieve, what will be in place at the end, and when you need to achieve it by. Once this is clear you can start to work out the steps needed to achieve this, who else will need to be involved, and whether additional resources are required. You may need input from colleagues outside your team, and you may be able to delegate some of the activities to your team members.

If your results rely on somebody else doing something, you will want to liaise with them early on to negotiate and agree what they will deliver and when. You may have to be flexible about the final delivery date. On other occasions, colleagues will be reliant on you, in order to achieve their objectives. If you demonstrate commitment to helping them, in turn they will be more likely to support you and make an extra effort.

Allocating Time to Activities

Before you can schedule all your activities, you need to work out how long to allocate to each of the tasks e.g. if you need to do some research, write a report, or meet an MOH partner, how long will each take you? You might base your estimate on previous experience, or by asking a more experienced colleague. For new tasks, you may want to note the time taken, for future reference.

You may have to be pragmatic and allocate a shorter time in order to accommodate other priorities. This is not ideal, but it is better than failing to do the task.

Scheduling the Work

Once you have worked out all the tasks you need to do over the next period, it is important to schedule all the activities, not just the meetings and off-site activities. If there are a number of steps, it helps to work out which tasks can be done concurrently e.g. by you and a team member at the same time, and which tasks are dependent on the completion of a previous task.

You may also want to schedule regular times when your 'door' is open for queries from colleagues. This is helpful for other staff, as they know when you are available, and protects you from non-urgent interruptions at other times in the day.

To record your schedule, there are many on-line calendar options, or you might prefer a paper-based diary and / or a wall chart - you just need to use the tools that suit you best. Whatever you use make sure you keep the schedule up-to-date and that you have a mechanism for indicating progress and completion of tasks. It is helpful if your colleagues have access to your detailed schedule, so that they can support you appropriately. For example, if you have blocked out 1 hour to prepare for an important meeting, they know to avoid interrupting you unless there is an urgent query.

For more complex activities, particularly where some activities are dependent on each other, you might need to use a more sophisticated tool, such as project management software. Alternatively, you might be able to apply the principles of critical path analysis. This technique will help you to sequence tasks, and most importantly to work out the 'critical path'. This is the path that tells you the minimum time required to complete the whole activity. For further information, have a look at the following YouTube clip:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jg7wDtP24hU>

Energy Levels

When scheduling tasks to a particular time of day, you might want to consider when you are most alert.

Most people will notice variation in their energy levels throughout the day. These will vary for individuals, but peak performance is typically attained mid-morning, falling off before lunch. After food a smaller peak is often reached during the afternoon which rapidly drops and slows down during the evening, coming to a low during the sleeping hours. Eating a heavy lunch will probably prevent your afternoon peak!

We all know people who are up early every day and start work happily. On the other hand, some of us are terrible to be with first thing in the morning, but peak later during the day and are often still working at midnight.

The secret here is to know yourself, and to use your peak times for:

- Creative thinking
- Problem solving and decision making
- Challenging tasks

and to use your low times for

- Routine maintenance tasks
- Travel
- Tasks that require less brain power