

Capturing That Elusive Thing Called Time

By Kathy Paauw

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"The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing."
- -Stephen Covey

So often I hear people say, "I can't afford to take time out of my busy schedule to plan!" To that I respond by saying, "If you are that tight on time, then you can't afford NOT to take time out to plan." I'll illustrate my point with a real-life example.

Over the past year I have worked with two very bright and capable women who have a lot in common. I'll call them Carol and Marilyn (not their real names). Both are professionals working in similar fields. Both supervise a large team of employees. Both are married to spouses who also work outside the home. Both are mothers of school-age kids. Both are about the same age. Both struggle with managing the volume of paper and electronic information they receive daily. Looking at these women from the outside, they appear to have a lot in common.

And they are very different. Carol and Marilyn independently hired me to help them get organized. Before teaching them a process I use to manage paper and de-clutter their offices (visit <http://www.orgcoach.net/trimthefat.html>), I spent some time talking with them about their priorities. Why? Because organizing one's physical environment without first clarifying priorities is like rearranging deck chairs on The Titanic!

Although I am devoting the majority of this article to a discussion about time management, I want to first point out the difference between management and leadership. Management works within the system. Leadership works on the system. Stephen Covey reminds us that "fundamental to putting first things first in our lives is leadership before management." It becomes critical to ask yourself, "Am I doing the right things?" before "Am I doing things right?"

Once you are clear about your priorities (doing the right things), planning and organizing around those priorities is essential. This is because we are a society that is urgency addicted. We tend to focus on that which is urgent -- whether the activity is important or not. Stephen Covey sums up the problem very well: "It's important to realize that urgency itself is not the problem. The problem is that when urgency is the dominant factor in our lives, importance isn't. What we regard as "first things" are urgent things. We're so caught up in doing, we don't even stop to ask if what we're doing really needs to be done."

If you struggle with a strong urgency mindset, read on. I guarantee that you will feel more satisfied and fulfilled when you take steps to focus your time and energy on what's most important and avoid

those activities that are less important or not important to you.

TIME MANAGEMENT MATRIX

"What does it matter how much we do if what we're doing isn't what matters most?"
--Stephen Covey, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People

In his book First Things First, Stephen Covey offers a wonderful tool for analyzing how you spend your time -- the Time Management Matrix. Covey has broken time into four quadrants:

Quadrant I: Quadrant of Necessity

This quadrant represents activities that are necessary for you to focus on, because they are urgent (time-sensitive) AND important to you. These are some of the kinds of activities that fall into Q-I:

- * Pressing problems / crisis
- * Deadline-driven projects
- * Last-minute preparations for scheduled activities

We tend to focus on Q-I activities because they are urgent and the need to do these activities makes itself known to us. These activities are hard to ignore because our life experiences have taught us that when we ignore Q-I activities, we get into trouble.

Quadrant II: Quadrant of Quality & Personal Leadership

This quadrant represents activities that are important, but because they are not urgent, they are easy to put on the back burner for "when I have more time." In order to focus on these activities, one must be proactive. Here are examples of activities that fall into Q-II:

- * Preparation/planning
- * Prevention
- * Values clarification
- * Exercise
- * Relationship-building
- * True recreation/relaxation

The more time we spend in Q-II, the more quality we add to our lives. If we neglect Q-II activities long enough, sometimes they become Q-I activities (urgent and important). For example, exercise is generally considered a Q-II activity because there is no deadline by which you must exercise. However, if you neglect exercise long enough -- "I'll do it when I have more time" - it may become a Q-I (urgent) activity when your health care provider tells you that you will face major health problems if you don't start exercising regularly.

Unfortunately, "more time" never comes. We all get 168 hours a week. Check out my 168 Hour Exercise at <http://www.orgcoach.net/pdf/168hour.pdf> for a good time analysis tool.

Effectively translating these high-leverage Quadrant II goals into action requires a framework for effective decision-making about how you spend your time. Most people struggle to find time for the important but not urgent activities in their already-overflowing schedules. Covey reminds us that "the key is not to prioritize your schedule, but to schedule your priorities."

Quadrant III: Quadrant of Deception

This quadrant represents activities that are not important and urgent (time-sensitive). Q-III is known as the Quadrant of Deception, because we get deceived into believing that these activities are important because they are urgent, even though we've identified these activities as not important.

The word "urgent" means that the activity is time-sensitive or deadline-driven. For example, an incoming phone call is considered urgent because the phone is ringing right now. It may or may not be important, but if you don't answer the phone now, it will stop ringing. Here are examples of activities that fall into Q-III:

- * Unimportant interruptions & phone calls
- * Unimportant mail & reports
- * Some meetings
- * Many "pressing" matters
- * Many popular activities

The activities represented in this quadrant are ones that we would do well to say no to or renegotiate. The only exception to this would be activities that are important to someone who is important to you. You may deem an activity important because you value a relationship.

Some Q-III activities may be related to tasks required by an employer. For example, an employee is asked to write a report that he does not see any value in creating, but because the employer wants it -- and he values his job or that relationship -- the Q-III activity becomes a Q-I activity. If a large portion of your work is filled with activities that fall into Q-III, it may be time to consider career move.

Many of us are "urgency addicted" - a self-destructive behavior that temporarily fills a void created by unmet needs. This type of addiction is as dangerous as other commonly recognized addictions and dependencies.

Quadrant IV: Quadrant of Waste

This quadrant represents activities that are not important and are not urgent. Here are examples of activities that fall into Q-IV:

- * Trivia, busywork
- * Reviewing junk mail
- * Some phone calls
- * Escape activities
- * Viewing mindless TV shows

Most of us do not spend much time in this quadrant because we simply don't have time to waste. The most common Q-IV activity I encounter in my work with busy people is escape activities. When

the stress level gets high enough, some people escape from reality by doing activities that do not address or resolve the problem. This is considered wasteful.

Note that the same activity can fall into Q-II or Q-IV. You are the only one who can determine which quadrant the activity belongs in. If you are treating yourself to true recreation and relaxation (resting and renewing yourself), you are in Q-II. If you are engaging in an escape activity (avoiding the problem and not finding a solution), you are in Q-IV. The motivation behind the activity determines which quadrant you are in.

The goal is to manage activities in Quadrant I, focus on activities in Quadrant II, and avoid activities in Quadrants III and IV - activities that you've deemed as not important. And yet, because so many of us are urgency-addicted, we tend to spend the bulk of our time in Quadrants I and III - doing activities that are urgent and important or urgent and not important.

Now that you have a tool to help you measure how much of your time you spend doing activities that are not important to you, it's time to make some conscious choices about how you spend your time in the future.

WEEKLY PLANNING - A TRANSFORMATIONAL KEY TO RECLAIMING YOUR LIFE

"The greatest value of the planning process is not what it does to your schedule, but what it does to your head. As you begin to think more in terms of importance, you begin to see time differently. You become empowered to put first things first in your life in a significant way." --Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*

Let's revisit my clients, Carol and Marilyn.

Carol has fully embraced the weekly planning process. She is noticeably more at peace now than she was when we first started working together. Her quality of life has dramatically improved as she has clarified priorities and has done weekly planning to ensure that she focuses her time on Quadrant I and II activities and avoids Quadrant III and IV activities.

Marilyn has not embraced the weekly planning process. She is too busy putting out fires (Quadrant I) to spend time planning (Quadrant II). And the more she neglects Quadrant II activities - relationship-building, self-care, values clarification, and planning her schedule to accommodate what is most important in her life - the more Quadrant I activities she has to deal with. She generates her own fires and then feels compelled to put them out.

When we neglect activities in Quadrant II long enough, they often become Quadrant I. Then our schedules get filled with urgent activities. When urgency rules, stress levels go up, and we do not feel that we have any choice about how we spend our time.

A client recently started her coaching call with me by sharing her frustration about not having enough time. She went on to list all of the things that she HAD to do that day. After hearing her say "I have to..." about six times just for that day alone, I asked her, "Do you CHOOSE to do these things?" She recognized that she did not HAVE TO do any of the things...that she CHOSE to do most of them, and she might choose to either delegate or not do one of the things that before felt like a HAVE TO. The realization that these activities were a choice completely shifted how she felt about them.

Language is very powerful as we do our planning. Be aware of your self-talk as you make choices for the week. Listen especially for should, gotta, and have to in your self-talk. Those trigger words may signal that you may not be feeling at choice, even though you probably are. Unless someone

is holding a gun to your head, you have a lot more choice than you realize.

Stephen Covey has created a six-step weekly planning process. I've found that this process does not work nearly as well if I skip any of these steps:

1. Connect to your own personal mission statement.
2. Review your key roles, beginning with SELF.
3. Identify what you choose to do this week for each of your key roles.
4. Calendar in WHEN you will do what you chose in Step 3.
5. Exercise integrity in the moment of choice as you live your week.
6. Evaluate how your week went as you prepare for the next week.

To review this planning process in greater detail, visit <http://www.orgcoach.net/sixsteps.html>. This process has transformed my life as well as the lives of many of my clients.

People are motivated change by two things: increasing pleasure or decreasing pain. Weekly planning is a tool that has the capacity to help you increase pleasure and decrease pain in your life. I challenge you to go to your calendar NOW and schedule one hour a week for the next month -- preferably at the same time each week -- to do your weekly planning. I'll bet that the quality of each week will go up and you will feel a much greater sense of accomplishment because you will have heightened your focus on what's most important to you.

While you have your calendar out, I request that you add a note to e-mail me a month from now at <mailto:orgcoach@gte.net> and let me know how following this six-step weekly planning process has affected your life.

Kathy Paauw, a certified business/personal coach and organizing/productivity consultant, specializes in helping busy executives, professionals, and entrepreneurs de-clutter their schedules, spaces and minds. Contact her at <mailto:orgcoach@gte.net> or visit her website at <http://www.orgcoach.net> and learn how you can Find ANYTHING in 5 Seconds --Guaranteed!

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