A Time Management Tool – The Urgent/Important Matrix
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Many managers struggle with time management. Few have the resources they need to accomplish the tasks that they've been assigned (Wagner & Harter, 2006) and a lack of resources – including time – is a strong predictor of job stress (Clifton & Harter, 2019). In turn, job stress negatively impacts productivity. For example, in 2016, it was estimated that Canadian economy experienced a $50 billion lost in productivity (Langton, Robbins & Judge, 2019).

	Important	Not Important
Urgent	Requires immediate attention. Often triggers reactions. **AX Priorities**	Crisis responses from lack of planning Results from not setting priorities. **X Priorities**
Not Urgent	Related to mission of the organization, priority goals, goals and interests of individuals. **A Priorities**	Often deadlines are well off or not set. Re-evaluate why these tasks are on your list. **C Priorities**

It seems logical, then, that reducing job stress and enhancing the ability of managers to effectively address time management is a critical task. One method that has proven to be particularly effective in helping managers better use their time is based on Steven Covey's Urgent/Important matrix (Covey, 1989). The key factors of the matrix are summarized in the table above and include identifying matters as either urgent or not and important or not. Doing so creates four sets of priorities.

Urgent and Important

Priorities are often established based on two criteria – urgency and importance. Urgency is related to time. Something must be addressed in a particular timeframe. For example, when a client of a social service agency is suicidal, the counsellor faces an urgent situation. There are, however, other matters which are also related to time and are also treated with urgency. For example, when the phone rings, it is known that it will ring for a limited amount of time before the caller eventually hangs up. In many instances, the receiver will stop important work in order to answer the call. By contrast, important work is work that adds value to the organization's people or the way that it does business. It may or may not be urgent, just as urgent work may or may not be important.

Many unimportant tasks are done simply because they are urgent. Many important tasks are ignored until they become urgent. Often, they are then done in haste and inadequately. The matrix above provides busy managers with tips for dealing with time management issues.

While most subscribe to the belief that "time is precious," many find that they waste it anyway. Typically, managers fall victim to one of three bad habits. First, procrastination often comes into play. Many people wait until the last possible minute to take action. Second, managers are overwhelmed by managing crises. They have little time to address routine issues or plan proactively. Finally, managers fail to retain focus on a particular task. Instead, they shift from task to task, never completely finishing any one.

Prioritizing

Prioritizing – particularly in charitable organizations – is a difficult task. In an environment of shrinking resources and increasing demands for service, virtually every decision is perceived as important and urgent. Managers and leaders are forced to make choices on a daily – or even hourly – basis. In deciding which tasks to address first, a decision maker needs to decide:

- what must be done immediately – within say, two to three hours,
- what must be done very soon – within, a day,
- what must be done soon – within the week, and
- what must be done within the month.

In addition, it is important to have a good understanding of how long each task will take. In so doing, the manager can decide which tasks to prioritize and when.

The previous chart depicts a prioritization system developed by Ferner (1995). He classifies tasks into three levels of priority. Priority A tasks are "things that are important to us. They relate to our important goals" (p. 126). Priority X items are ones that are urgent. "They are required by our work, something our boss demands, or other people's A's" (p. 126). Finally, Ferner identifies Priority C's as ones that are "neither urgent nor important" and therefore they should be avoided if at all possible.

References

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