Prioritization & The Urgency Myth
Worksheet

What is Time Poverty?

Research shows that lack of time in our personal and professional lives time is at an all-time high. Consider recent articles and research from institutions including Harvard Business School, the Gallup employment analytics company and the World Health Organization.

– The number of Americans who *"never have enough time"* rose to 80% 2011-2018 *(Gallup)*
– In a survey to answer the question *"How are you?"* 80% responded with *"busy" (HBR)*
– Busyness and high effort is now *"morally admirable", even* regardless of output *(HBR)*
– Work, not leisure, is becoming the signifier of dominant social status *(Sociologist J. Gershuny)*
– Overwork is known to increase risk of stroke, heart disease, and death *(WHO 2021)*

Why Professionals are poor at prioritization

Experience from Executive Coaching and research from leading business schools also show net nationals are consistently poor at effective privatization, which means that what little time we have is often spent on the wrong activities. This has negative consequences in a number of areas.

– As professionals we gravitate towards working on the most urgent and important daily issues
– While these critical issues do need attention, there are more than one way to deal with them
– More effective delegation, better work systems, and selective use of time are some options
– But we rarely question our calendars, too often reacting unthinkingly to immediate demands
– In addition to causing stress and burnout, this strategy eliminates valuable thinking time
– The urgency myth shows there is another way to deliver personal performance in busy times

What is the Urgency Myth?

The myth about "urgency" at work is grounded in our traditional professional training that focuses on achieving as many tasks and outcomes as possible. Not "handling" the volume or complexity of work can be viewed as underperformance or a weakness in leadership. As a result we continue to push ourselves by taking on unrealistic tasks, working extended working hours and weekends, and not taking enough time off in an attempt to complete our "to-do" list. We also feel that failing to meet these (often self-imposed) goals this will damage our performance, financial success or reputation.

The "Eisenhower Matrix" is a well-established behavioral model that allows us to map all of our diary activities and projects across two descriptive criteria of "urgent" and "important". The name was inspired by a quote from American President Dwight Eisenhower: "I have two kinds of problems, the urgent and the important. The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent." The implication is that we spend too much time on <u>perceived</u> urgent activities and tasks, while ignoring the <u>deeper value</u> of more important work, because it does not demand a daily tension in the same way. The model has four quadrants across which we can map our activities. Below are examples of typical projects and tasks that fall into Quadrants 1-4.

Exercise

Now populate the blank matrix below with as many tasks, projects, and activities you can think of for the next period of time. A good way to do this is to transpose your diary for the next month and then add any further commitments, projects, or work to be done, including your main personal and family activities.
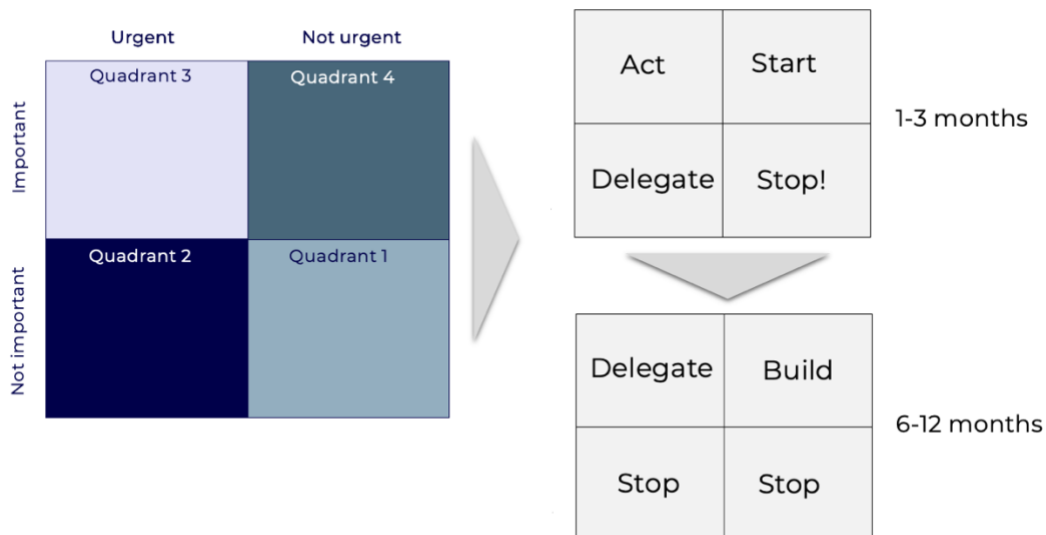
Using the matrix

Once you see how you are spending your time across the matrix, you can start planning how to improve. This takes focus and discipline. You must actively say no to some people to stop Q1 activities – which may make you unpopular. You must delegate more to reduce Q2 time, which may cause anxiety as you give control to others rather than do the work yourself. And for Q4 you must learn how identify and start more strategic actions to be a better leader (not urgent but important). These include research, writing, building your reputation, working on personal wellbeing, building capacity and continuous learning.

Over time, you can move across the gray boxes which indicate that the most effective leaders avoid Quadrant 1 and 2 altogether through active control of their agendas and excellent delegation, also delegating some of the urgent/important tasks to trusted colleagues and teams. Ultimately the best leaders maximize their time in Quadrant 4 by building team capacity, increasing their own expertise, enhancing their professional reputation, and in the long term growing their business and the profession.

In summary:

- For Quadrant 1, management theory shows that "saying no" is a key leadership trait
- Delegation is key to improve Quadrants 2 and 3 but beware the temptation to control
- Increasing time in Quadrant 4 will inject energy, purpose and strategy into your practice
- Remember, the longer term benefit of prioritization is reduced stress, anxiety and burnout

Questions for reflection

- What is in your current diary and to-do list, and how does it allocate across Quadrants 1-4?
- Where are you spending most time and what does this tell you about how you control time?
- The goal is to not exceed 30% of your time in Q1+Q2, and to allocate at least 20% to Q4
- How can you begin to improve the mix – do you need new rules or ways of working?
- People will be key, so who can help you improve prioritization – colleagues, friends, partners?
- As you move into Q4, what is the most valuable thing you can add to make a real difference?
- What would be possible for you if you moved 20-30% of your work into Quadrant 4? Or 50%?

(Sources: Eisenhower matrix, www.hbr.org 2023)