



By Ryan Hill

President Dwight Eisenhower is credited with saying, “The things that are urgent are seldom important, and the things that are important are seldom urgent.”[1] His statement hits on a problem that haunts all leaders; we often spend too much time on things that seem to be important, but really are not.

One of the most significant lessons I’ve learned over my military career is that urgent matters have a way of dressing up like they are important and then sneaking in and stealing time. As leaders, we are inundated with countless daily distractions: phone calls, emails, pop-up meetings, and drop-in visits. Even without these interruptions, our calendars are full, and our to-do lists are long! All these little things scream for our attention and combine to form a ‘cloud of busyness’ that prevents us from identifying what is really important.

I have found that the minutia can sometimes consume me because I simply fail to take the time to break through that cloud and think about my priorities; I fail to slow down enough to see what I’m really doing with my day. To counter this lack of reflection, I began to ask myself two basic questions on my drive into work each day. These questions not only help me prioritize my day, but have helped keep me centered on what is important.

Question 1: What am I tempted to put first today? ...and how important is it?

When I ask this question, the thing that normally comes to mind is my pet projects and the tasks I have lined out for each day. They are usually written on a notecard with a little box next to each item. I tend, as I suspect others do as well, to be very task oriented. I strive to efficiently check off each little box. Essentially, my to-do list becomes a top priority.

Is that a bad thing? This is where the second part of the questions comes into play. Maybe the things on the list are important enough to prioritize. If so, great; I've confirmed that I'm focused on the right things. On the other hand, these tasks may just be urgent, pleading for my attention, and only disguised as important.

I have also found that when important matters are complex or take a great deal of time, energy, or emotion, I turn my focus to tasks and activities I can get done quickly. It gives me a sense of control and, in turn, makes me feel better about how I am spending my time. Unfortunately, in most instances, I'm not even aware this is happening. I instinctively pour myself into these straightforward tasks because they look important and I'm confident I can knock them out. Again, it is the "how important is it?" question that pulls me out of my comfort zone and allows me to have a more objective look at my plan for the day. It gives me an opportunity to assess the value of what I'm doing and see if it is truly worth my time.

Question 2: What is important to me? ...and how can I show that through my actions today?

While the first question allows me to look at my actions and plans for the day, the second question goes deeper. It reminds me of what I really value; it cuts right through the fog of the daily grind and gets to the heart of the matter. On one level, this question focuses on the "why?" of my work. Why does our organization exist? What are we truly trying to accomplish? This seems very simple, but the fact is, our true purpose can easily get lost. Small projects, meetings, and bureaucratic administrative activities can all take on a life of their own. When they do, they are no longer subordinate to the greater purpose of their existence. Asking what is important places our primary mission out front, where it belongs.

On another level, this question helps keep the elusive work-life balance in check. What do I truly value as a person? How does it square with my actions? There is a good chance we have all faced this at some point. It could have come in the form of marital problems, issues

with our kids, or losing someone we love. These experiences have a way of jarring us out of the status quo pursuit of a task-filled day. They bring perspective to life and refocus us on what we truly value. Question two is intended, not only to help me see the “why” of my job and to align my work efforts toward it but to help me hold on to that perspective on a daily basis. It is to keep me from reaching the end of my career and looking back with regret because I focused on the wrong things.

The second part of this question, “How can I show that through my actions today?” also ensures that I act in line with my values. Stephen Covey wrote that while urgent issues act on us, important issues “require more initiative, more proactivity.”[2] We must intentionally seek out the important things in life. Otherwise, we will find that the urgent seizes the initiative and takes control.

And one more thing

I still carry a little folded 3×5 notecard in my pocket, filled with ‘to-dos’, and each with its own little blank square anxiously waiting to be checked off. However, when I take the time to ask myself these two questions, that notecard no longer owns me. In the same way, phone calls, emails, and the busyness of the day no longer cloud my view of what is important. I’ve reclaimed my life and can focus on what is truly important...the tasks and actions that align with my values. It was as simple as answering these two daily questions.

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[1] Morris G. Fuller, “Making Maximum Use of L.O.M.A. Facilities,” *Proceedings of the Annual Conference of Life Office Management Association*, Fort Wayne, IN, 1954, 16.

[2] Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic*, (New York: Fireside, 1989), 151.

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