

# How to prioritise



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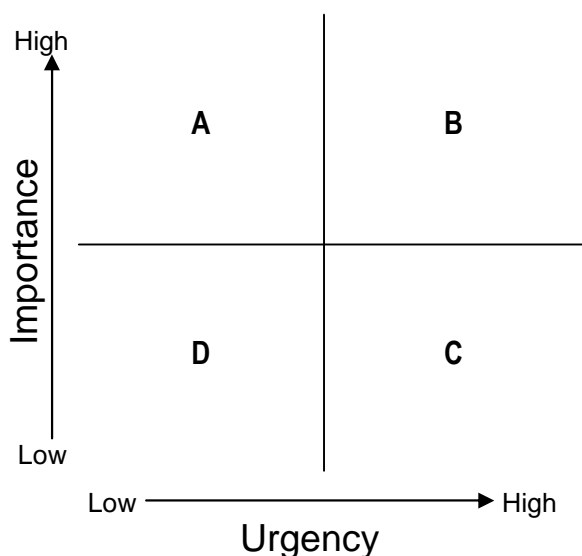
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Making decisions on what projects to tackle, and when to tackle them, will feature as a daily task for most people. We all have a variety of jobs to perform with goals to achieve, and each job will have its own timescale and deadline. This is why it is important for each of us to develop the ability to prioritise. In essence this is the ability to focus on what is important and then to manage the task effectively in the face of the demands on our time that inevitably crop up every day.

We tend to face both short-term enquiries that take up our time and long-term developments that are not urgent but will become so if they are put off and are left unfinished. If we are unable to manage our tasks effectively through prioritising it will lead us to feel out of control and possibly stressed. This is why having a clear approach to managing our tasks and our time is important.

This factsheet is going to concentrate on the Stephen Covey Time Management Matrix, which is a tool you can use to help you prioritise your tasks and manage your time more efficiently.

## The Matrix



## How to use it

- 1) Draw a grid of four squares with one axis labelled "Urgency" and the other labelled "Importance" (as shown in the diagram).
- 2) Collate a list of tasks that you are currently aware of.
- 3) Place each task in the grid to indicate its importance and its urgency.

## Examples

**A – Low urgency, high importance** e.g. organising the programme for a County development consultation day. It is highly important that a programme is created so that everyone knows what is expected of them and the day has a useful outcome. However, you have 6 months until the event and it will probably take a planning meeting of 2 hours. Therefore you have plenty of time to schedule this meeting in.

**B – High urgency, high importance** e.g. your car breaking down on the way to the Scout headquarters. You need to be there to open up because you are the only person with a key. They also need you there because without you there will not be enough leaders. At this point all your efforts will be engaged in finding alternative transport or possibly cancelling the meeting. You are pressured against time and it is really important you are able to communicate your problem with the other leader. This task cannot be delayed but must be addressed immediately.

**C – High urgency, low importance** e.g. the person in whose house you are having a team meeting that evening has fallen ill. You now need to find another venue for the meeting. It is urgent because you have little time to make other arrangements but it is not highly important because you could always reschedule the meeting since outcome doesn't need to be implemented until next month.

**D – Low urgency, low importance.** These are not urgent and are not very important, so first you

may need to determine whether the task actually needs to be done. For example, you may intend to redesign the letterhead used for District communications at some point. However, the current one uses up to date contact details so a redesign is not urgent. Also, it is not that important since most people are usually more concerned with the content of a letter than with its design. So it is a task you will do at some point but it is not pressing.

### **How to apply the model**

Often our lives will contain tasks from all four categories and the amount of time that we spend on each category will depend on our lifestyle, job, role within Scouting etc. Once you have prioritised all of your tasks the categories give you a better idea of how to organise your time.

**A – Development tasks.** How you tackle the tasks in this category is the key to getting things under control. These tasks should be your focus, since time spent here will improve the outcome of these tasks. Planning ahead and preparing properly will prevent these tasks becoming more urgent, unmanageable and stressful.

**B – Crisis or Fleeting Opportunities.** These tasks are things which need to be done now! Many of these tasks are things which land on us from outside and that we have no control over. However, you may find that some tasks in this category are things which should have begun in category A and, if they had been better managed, would not have reached crisis level. Look at these tasks and plan how you can manage your time better to avoid similar things being in this category in the future.

**C – Distractions.** Avoid spending more time on these tasks than is absolutely necessary. Although they are urgent tasks, keep things in perspective and be realistic about their level of importance. It can be easy to artificially elevate the level of importance of these tasks, particularly if others are pushing you to complete them. Spend the minimum time needed, and then move on. Being distracted by these tasks is to the detriment of your development tasks.

**D – Maintenance tasks.** Avoid spending time on these tasks, and ask yourself if they really need to be done at all. If so, think about which could be delegated to others. For those which you have to do yourself schedule regular time to do them and avoid getting distracted by them at other times.

### **Creating a weekly schedule**

The examples given above were only related to Scouting, but the tasks you have identified in your own life will have taken in all aspects. Now that you have identified where your tasks fall within the window, take time to estimate how much time you should spend on each category in a week and produce a weekly schedule.

Remember:

- Include time for planning.
- Work with your environment – when will it be practical to achieve your tasks, have you got the resources available etc.
- Know your situation – if you are at work crises are more likely to hit your desk first thing in the morning, so plan for them at the beginning of your day.
- Plan your development tasks for when you are at your most productive.
- Plan distractions and maintenance tasks (which take less concentration) for a time when you are less productive.
- Always include time for your breaks (e.g. lunch)
- Be specific and realistic when setting aside time for the tasks.

A weekly timetable will allow you to schedule your tasks into your week. It will ensure that you use your time effectively because you have set aside time for tasks to be achieved. You have also allowed time for your B tasks (crises or fleeting opportunities) which are often the unpredictable and harder to manage tasks.

However, even with a detailed weekly plan the events that occur in a day may offer new challenges and may require you to reorganise your schedule. This is why daily plans will allow you to be much more effective in allowing for flexibility and small tasks. So once you have written up a weekly schedule spend each morning (about 5 minutes) writing out a more detailed plan for the day.

Remember:

- Small tasks cease to be distractions when you plan time for them in your schedule.
- Resist the temptation to deal with small tasks as they arrive – write them down & leave them until the time you have planned to do them
- Be flexible. For example, if there are no crises in the morning, move on to working on your development tasks.
- Concentrate on one task at a time. Do not move onto the next planned item until the current one is complete.

- Within each category, prioritise the tasks that need to be done, with the most urgent and important first.

### Creating development plans

This model can also be used as a starting point for creating a development plan for your section, Group, District or County. Much of the advice above is also applicable to creating a plan which will be implemented over a much longer timescale.

When building the list of tasks, and assessing their urgency and importance, get the whole of your leadership team involved. People are likely to have differing views on the urgency and importance of some tasks – allow the discussions but ensure that they come to an agreed conclusion as each task must end up somewhere on the grid. Getting everyone involved in the discussion gives them a stake in the process, and means they are much more likely to get involved with delivering the final plan.

Once your tasks have been categorised you will be able to start to build a development plan from them. Use the tasks in category A as the basis for your plan. Ensure that tasks similar to those currently in category B don't end up there in the future by including them in your development plan. None of the tasks currently in categories C or D should be included in your development plan – you will only have a certain amount of time and resources available to focus on development. However, it is useful to keep a list of all of the tasks that you have come up with as they may become more important in the future once some development tasks have been completed.

Remember to include timescales in your development plan and review it at regular intervals to ensure that it remains relevant. Allocate someone to be responsible for ensuring that each item happens to avoid things getting forgotten and becoming crises.

### Summary

Prioritise your tasks into four categories:

1. Crises & Fleeting Opportunities
2. Development Tasks (Projects)
3. Distractions (Small Tasks)
4. Maintenance Tasks.

Manage your time more efficiently by producing a schedule with space for each of these categories, and plan each period (annually, monthly, weekly and daily) individually in advance.

Following this pattern will allow you more control over the tasks you have to do. There will always be unexpected situations and small tasks that crop up; but many of the tasks that are anticipated and planned for can be dealt with before they reach crisis level.

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