This Genius Process for Prioritizing Reduces Stress and Increases Productivity



President Dwight D. Eisenhower created a simple method for determining what needs your attention now and what can wait.

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Having lots to do can be a mixed blessing. On the upside, it can be energizing to steamroll through your to-do list and get menacing tasks off your plate, creating a powerful sense of accomplishment. On the downside, trying to decide what to approach first, and how much effort to devote to it, can be daunting. Technology only adds fuel to the fire. Your smartphone lets you catch up on emails while you're in line at the grocery store, but it also lets emails catch up to you

while you’re at your niece’s birthday party. Stress has skyrocketed in large part because work-life boundaries have become so blurry.

Time management is one of the greatest challenges to effective leadership in the 21st century. Unless you’re careful, you might devote too much of your attention to unimportant tasks and too little to the most essential work. The ability to prioritize is just as important to good leadership as the ability to influence.

My favorite productivity philosophy comes from a 20th-century icon: Dwight D. Eisenhower, the five-star general turned U.S. President. In describing his approach to decision making, he famously said, “I have two kinds of problems: the urgent and the important. What is urgent is seldom important, and what is important is seldom urgent.” Making many tough, successful decisions over the course of his life inspired him to create the world-famous Eisenhower Principle, helping leaders everywhere to prioritize by urgency and importance. Eisenhower clearly knew the value of prioritizing, as did author Steven Covey, who popularized the Eisenhower Matrix.

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There are four sectors in this matrix, and each activity you undertake can be classified according to its urgency and importance. If you can get into the habit of using it, your productivity will soar and your stress will plummet. Here are the crucial categories.

Do Now

Tasks in this sector are important *and* urgent, and a good chunk of your day should be devoted to them. These high-priority tasks need to be finished today or tomorrow and almost always require you to “eat the frog first.” Replying to

an email that needs an immediate answer falls into this category, and so does finishing that report due in the morning. Also, consider tasks that may have snuck up on you with non-negotiable deadlines and penalties that attach for failure to timely submit. If you don’t address these tasks now, there could be unwelcome consequences.

Schedule

These tasks are important but not urgent, but still require you to set aside time to organize and calendar them. These are usually longer-term goals, such as completing a book, obtaining professional certifications or arranging brainstorming sessions for future projects. They may also include setting up doctors appointments, quarterly performance reviews or submitting tax filings. The nice thing about these tasks is that you can usually work on them at a time of your choosing. Just don’t forget to actually schedule the time to do the work, including creating ticklers as appropriate reminders.

Delegate

This sector is reserved for tasks that are urgent but not important and should be delegated to another, appropriate professional. If graphic design isn’t really your thing, why waste precious time and energy grappling with that time-sensitive conference flier? Better to send it to over to the art department. Similarly, a lot of good information can come from business meetings, but often you don’t have to be present to benefit. If you can send a good notetaker to tomorrow’s meeting, you can skip it and use the time to work on other priorities. However, if all else fails, you can work on these tasks yourself, but only as a third priority after working through quadrants one and two.

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Eliminate

Those unimportant, non-urgent activities that seem to eat your day fall into this category. They include the most common of distractions: gaming or texting on your phone, falling down the social media rabbit hole, or purging your inbox of endless emails – all while priorities hang in the balance. Try eliminating these bad habits as much as possible; they are time-wasters that prevent you from completing your most important tasks. This isn't to say that you can't occasionally engage in mindless activities. After all, everyone needs some downtime. Just be sure to take it when time isn't of the essence.

The Eisenhower Matrix is an effective tool you can leverage both personally and professionally. Use it to reduce wasted time and increase productivity, which means there will be less stress and more of the best of you to go around at the end of the day. That's a win for you and for everyone in your life. Cheers to prioritizing!

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