

Important vs. Urgent: 5 Ways to Focus On What Really Matters

One simple fact divides effective and ineffective people: effective people spend the majority of their time working on important rather than urgent things.

Have you ever felt like you spend a lot of time being really busy, but at the end of the day you don't feel like you've really accomplished anything? I've felt this way on many occasions.

It's not that I've been lazy or haven't been productive. I've checked my email, responded to everyone, cleaned and organized my desk, filed everything and checked all the social networking sites. Basically I spent a lot of time doing things that kept me very busy and seemed important at the time.



But after finishing all of these tasks, I still had a feeling that I hadn't really accomplished anything. I didn't feel any real fulfillment. The reason is while I spent a lot of time working on urgent things, none of them were really important.

A Personal Example

Here's an example of deciphering the important vs. the urgent. One of the things I've been struggling with recently is becoming an early riser. I know that if I wake up earlier, I can have more time to work on important projects. More often than not, though, when I wake up I have the urge to just push the snooze button one more time. It feels so good to go back to sleep for a few more minutes. An hour and a half later I will finally drag myself out of bed knowing that can't push it any further. The whole time wishing I would have just had the willpower to get myself up when I said I would.

I know that working on my blog or going to the gym would have had more of a long term impact, but I sacrificed the urgency of wanting more sleep for the importance of having a greater impact. I've gradually been able to condition myself to wake up earlier over time. Not by using my willpower, but by raising my awareness of what's more important to me.

The problem wasn't that I didn't have the discipline to wake up early, it was that I was conditioned to prioritize urgency over importance. My awareness alone has allowed me to get myself out of bed earlier, not grudgingly (okay maybe a little) but willingly – even

cheerfully sometimes. That's because I know that at the end of the day I'll feel more fulfilled knowing I spent that time working to get closer to making my goals a reality, rather than getting a few more minutes of sleep.

So how do we raise our awareness of what is truly important? How can we recondition ourselves to have a greater impact? The following are 5 ways I try stay focused on important, rather than simply urgent, tasks each day:

5 Ways to Stay Focused on the Important

1. Set 3 Most Important Tasks (MITs) for the day. Often the best way to find out what the most important tasks are is to narrow down your three most important items for the day. Ask yourself: "If I could only do three things today, what would I feel the most fulfilled in doing?"

2. Focus on providing value. One of the easiest ways for me to discover whether I'm working on important or urgent items is asking myself how much value it will provide myself or others. I know going to the gym, writing articles and spending quality time with my wife will have a more long term impact than sorting files, checking my site stats every 30 minutes and playing Tetris. Ask yourself: "How much value will this provide me, or someone else?"

3. Think long-term. Another great way to find out how important the work you're doing is, is to focus on how long-term of an impact it will have. Clearing out my inbox will have a much shorter impact than writing an article that people will be able to read for years to come. Going to the gym and eating a healthy breakfast will have a much greater impact than the short term rush of drinking a grande soy latte. Ask yourself: "Will this make a difference a week, month or year from now? Five years?"

4. First things first. I find the best way for me to complete my MITs is to start on them right away in the morning. When I spend my time working on non-important but urgent items I end up getting caught up in trying to put out the next fire. Also, when I try to work on my important tasks later in the day, there's usually more distractions and more interruptions. Finishing my most important tasks in the beginning of the day ensures that if the afternoon comes and I get bombarded with busy-work, I can still finish the day feeling that I accomplished what I wanted to.

5. Have a clear vision. This goes along with setting your most important tasks, but here we're thinking about our long-term vision. If you can't measure it, you can't manage it. Creating a vision is about seeing objectively where you'd like to be in the next 5, 10 or 20 years. It also can include what accomplishing those objectives will feel like, what it will look like, sound, smell and taste like. When we have a clear vision of what we want the future to look like, it's a lot easier to stay on task and not get caught up in answering the next email or voicemail. Think about whether or not the work you're doing is moving you closer to your vision, or if it won't make much of a difference tomorrow or next week.