



### **Eisenhower's "Urgent/Important" Principle: Using time effectively, not Just efficiently**

Eisenhower's Urgent/Important Principle helps you to think about and categorise your priorities and determine which of your activities are important and which are distractions or low priorities.

#### **What Are "Urgent" and "Important" Activities?**

In a 1954 speech, former U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was quoting Dr J. Roscoe Miller, president of Northwestern University, said: "I have two kinds of problems: the urgent and the important. The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent." This "Eisenhower Principle" is said to be how he organized his workload and priorities.

He recognised that great time management means being effective as well as efficient. In other words, we must spend our time on things that are important, not just the urgent ones. To do this and to minimise the stress of having too many tight deadlines, we need to understand this distinction:

- **Important** activities have an outcome that leads to us achieving our goals, whether these are professional or personal.
- **Urgent** activities demand immediate attention, and are usually associated with achieving someone else's goals. They are often the ones we concentrate on and they demand attention because the consequences of not dealing with them are immediate.

When we know which activities are important and which are urgent, we can overcome the natural tendency to focus on unimportant urgent activities, so that we can clear enough time to do what's essential for our success. This is the way we move from "firefighting" into a position where we can grow our businesses and our careers.

#### **How to Use Eisenhower's Principle**

To use this principle, list all of the activities and projects that you feel you have to do. Try to include everything that takes up your time at work, however unimportant. If you manage your time using a **To-Do List** you will have done this already.

Next, think about each activity and put it into one of four categories, as shown in figure 1, below:

Figure 1 – Eisenhower's Urgent/Important Principle



Then use the strategies described below to schedule your activities.

### 1. Important and urgent

There are two distinct types of urgent and important activities: ones that you could not have foreseen, and others that you've left until the last minute.

You can eliminate last-minute activities by planning ahead and [avoiding procrastination](#).

However, you can't always predict or avoid some issues and crises. Here, the best approach is to leave some time in your schedule to handle unexpected issues and unplanned important activities. (If a major crisis arises, then you'll need to reschedule other tasks.)

If you have a lot of urgent and important activities, identify which of these you could have foreseen, and think about how you could schedule similar activities ahead of time, so that they don't become urgent.

### 2. Important, but not urgent

These are the activities that help you achieve your personal and professional goals, and complete important work.

Make sure that you have plenty of time to do these things properly, so that they do not become urgent. Also, remember to leave enough time in your schedule to deal with unforeseen problems. This will maximize your chances of keeping on track, and help you avoid the stress of work becoming more urgent than necessary.

### 3. Not important, but urgent

Urgent but not important tasks are things that prevent you from achieving your goals. Ask yourself whether you can reschedule or [delegate](#) them.

A common source of such activities is other people. Sometimes it's appropriate to say "no" to people politely, or to encourage them to solve the problem themselves.

Alternatively, try to have time slots when you are available, so that people know they can speak with you then. A good way to do this is to arrange regular meetings with those who

interrupt you often, so that you can deal with all their issues at once. You'll then be able to concentrate on your important activities for longer.

#### **4. Not Important and not urgent**

These activities are just a distraction – avoid them if possible.

You can simply ignore or cancel many of them. However, some may be activities that other people want you to do, even though they don't contribute to your own desired outcomes. Again, say "no" politely, if you can, and explain why you cannot do it.

If people see that you are clear about your objectives and [boundaries](#), they will often avoid asking you to do "not important" activities in the future.

#### **Conclusion**

Once you have used the Eisenhower Principle to categorise your work, it becomes much clearer which activities you should be focussing on and you can start to apply your energy on making the most progress on those tasks.