

This is the 2nd tool of 3 in the Time Management Toolkit series. You can download the tools in this series at: atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation

It's important to realize that urgency itself is not the problem. The problem is that when urgency is the *dominant* factor in our lives, importance isn't. What we regard as "first things" are urgent things. We're so caught up in doing, we don't even stop to ask if what we are doing really needs to be done. As a result, we exacerbate the gap between the compass and the clock.

Many of the traditional time management tools actually exacerbate the problems. Daily planning and 'to do' lists essentially keep us focused on prioritizing and doing the urgent. And the more urgency we have in our lives, the less importance we have.

IMPORTANCE

Many important things that contribute to our overall objectives and give richness and meaning to life don't tend to act upon us or press us. Because they're not "urgent," they are things that we must act upon.

In order to focus on the issues of urgency and importance more effectively, let's look at the Time Management Matrix below. As you can see it categorizes our activities into quadrants. We spend our time in one of these four ways:

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	I Quadrant of Urgency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crises • Pressing problems • Deadline-driven projects, meetings, preparation 	II Quadrant of Leadership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visioning • Planning • Preparation • Prevention • Relationship building • Coaching/mentoring • Capacity building • True re-creation & self-care
Not Important	III Quadrant of Deception <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interruptions, some phone calls • Some email, some reports • Some meetings • Many proximate, pressing matters • Activities that don't further your purpose and mission 	IV Quadrant of Waste <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trivia, busywork • Some phone calls • "Escape" activities • Irrelevant email • Excessive Internet/TV • Excessive Facebook etc. • Recreation that doesn't renew or really satisfy

Quadrant I represents things that are both "urgent" and "important." **This is the Quadrant of Urgency.** Here's where we handle an irate client, meet a deadline, repair a broken-down machine, undergo heart surgery, or help a crying child who has been hurt. We need to spend time in Quadrant I. This is where we manage, where we produce, where we bring our experience and judgment to bear in responding to many needs and challenges. If we ignore it, we become buried alive. But we also need to realize that many important activities become urgent through procrastination, or because we don't do enough prevention and planning.

Quadrant II includes activities that are "important, but not urgent." **This is the Quadrant of Leadership.** Here's where we do our long-range planning, anticipate and prevent problems, empower others, broaden our minds and increase our skills through

reading and continuous professional development, envision how we're going to help a struggling son or daughter, prepare for important meetings and presentations, or invest in relationships through deep, honest listening. Increasing time spent in this quadrant *increases our ability to do*. Ignoring this quadrant feeds and enlarges Quadrant I, creating stress, burnout, and deeper crises for the person consumed by it. On the other hand, investing in this quadrant shrinks Quadrant I. Planning, preparation, and prevention keep many things from becoming urgent. Quadrant II does not act upon us; we must act on it. This is the Quadrant of personal leadership.

Quadrant III is almost the phantom of Quadrant I. It includes things that are “urgent, but not important.” **This is the Quadrant of Deception.** The noise of urgency creates the illusion of importance. But the actual activities, if they’re important at all, are only important to someone else. Many phone calls, meetings, and drop-in visitors fall into this category. We spend a lot of time in Quadrant III meeting other people’s priorities and expectations, thinking we’re really in Quadrant I.

Quadrant IV is reserved for those activities that are “not urgent and not important.” **This is the Quadrant of Waste.** Of course, we really shouldn’t be there at all. But we get so battle-scarred from being tossed around in Quadrants I and III that we often “escape” to Quadrant IV for survival. What kinds of things are in Quadrant IV? Not necessarily recreational things, because recreation in the true sense of re-creation is a valuable Quadrant II activity. But reading addictive light novels, habitually watching “mindless” television shows, or gossiping around the water cooler at the office would qualify as Quadrant IV time wasters. Quadrant IV is not survival; it’s deterioration. It may have an initial cotton candy feel, but we quickly find there is nothing there.

We’d like to suggest now that you look at the Time Management Matrix and think back over the past week of your life. If you were to place each of your last week’s activities in one of these quadrants, where would you say you spent the majority of your time?

Think carefully as you consider Quadrants I and III. It’s easy to think because something is urgent, it’s important. A quick way to differentiate between the two quadrants is to ask yourself if the urgent activity contributed to an important objective. If not, it probably belongs in Quadrant III.

If you’re like most of the people we work with, there’s a good chance you spent the majority of your time in Quadrants I and III. And what’s the cost? If urgency is driving you, what important things – maybe even “first things” – are not receiving your time and attention?

Think again about the questions you answered in the first chapter:

*What is the one activity that you **know** if you did superbly well and consistently would have significant positive results in your personal life?*

*What is the one activity that you **know** if you did superbly well and consistently would have significant positive results in your professional or work life?*

Analyze what quadrant your answers are in. Our guess is that they’re probably in Quadrant II. As we’ve asked these questions of thousands of people, we find that a great majority of them fall under seven key activities:

1. Improving communication with people
2. Better preparation
3. Better planning and organization
4. Taking better care of self
5. Seizing new opportunities
6. Personal development
7. Empowerment

All of these are in Quadrant II. They're important.

So why aren't people doing them? Why aren't you doing the things you identified from the questions above?

Probably because they're not urgent. They're not pressing. They don't act on you. You have to act on them.

THE IMPORTANCE PARADIGM

Clearly, we deal with both factors – urgency and importance – in our lives. But in our day-to-day decision making, one of these factors tends to dominate. The problem comes when we operate primarily from a paradigm of urgency rather than a paradigm of importance.

When we operate out of the importance paradigm, we live in Quadrants I and II. We're out of Quadrants III and IV, and as we spend more time in preparation, prevention, planning, and empowerment, we decrease the amount of time we spend putting out fires in Quadrant I. Even the nature of Quadrant I changes. Most of the time, we're there by choice rather than default. We may even choose to make something urgent or timely because it's important.

An associate shared this experience:

Recently one of my friends was going through a crisis in her relationship. I was extremely busy with home and work, but was managing to keep on top of things and maintain my personal renewal time. One day in particular, I was scheduled for three meetings, some car service, shopping, and an important lunch date when she called. I knew immediately that she was having a really rough day and quickly decided to shelve my other activities and make the hour drive to her house. I knew that my next day would be heavy in Quadrant I activities because there were things I wasn't going to be able to do today in preparation. But this was important, very important. I chose to place myself in a position where I could live in urgency, but it was a decision I could feel good about.

In our seminars, we often ask people to identify the feelings they associate with different paradigms. When they talk about urgency, they typically use words such as *stressed out, used up, unfulfilled, and worn out*. But when they talk about importance they use words like *confident, fulfilled, on track, meaningful, and peaceful*. You might try this exercise yourself. How do you feel when operating from one paradigm or the other? These feelings can tell you a lot about the source of the results you're getting in your life.

QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK ABOUT THE MATRIX

Now we know that real life is not as neat and tight and logical as the four quadrants would suggest. There's a continuum within and between each quadrant. There's some overlapping. The categories are a matter of degree as well as kind.

Below are some common questions people ask about the matrix:

- **Among all the urgent and important things that face us, how do we know what to do?** This is the dilemma that fills our lives. It's what leads us to feel we need to hunker down and do more, faster. But almost always, there *is* one thing among all the others that should be done first. In a sense there is a Quadrant I of Quadrant I, or a Quadrant II of Quadrant II. How we decide what's *most* important at any given time is one of the primary issues we'll address in the following chapters of this book.
- **Is it bad to be in Quadrant I?** No, it's not. In fact, many people will spend a significant amount of their time in Quadrant I. The key issue is why you're there. Are you in Quadrant I based on urgency or importance? If urgency dominates, when importance fades, you'll slip into Quadrant III—it's the urgency addiction. But if you're in Quadrant I because of importance, when urgency fades you'll move into Quadrant II. Both Quadrant I and Quadrant II describe what's most important; it's only the time factor that changes. The real problem is when you're spending time in Quadrants III and IV.
- **Where do I get the time to spend in Quadrant II?** If you're looking for time to spend in Quadrant II, Quadrant III is the primary place to get it. Time spent in Quadrant I is both urgent and important—we already know we need to be there. And we know we shouldn't be in Quadrant IV. But Quadrant III can fool us. The key is learning to see all of our activities in terms of their importance. Then we're able to reclaim time lost to the deception of urgency and spend it in Quadrant II.
- **What if I'm in a Quadrant I environment?** Some professions are, by nature, almost completely Quadrant I. For example, it's the job of firefighters, many doctors and nurses, police officers, news reporters, and editors to respond to the urgent and important. For these people, it's even more critical to capture Quadrant II time for the simple reason that it builds their capacity to handle Quadrant I. Time spent in Quadrant II increases our capacity to do.
- **Is there anything in Quadrant I that doesn't act on us and demand our attention "right now"?** Some things are crises or problems in the making if we don't attend to them. We can choose to make these things urgent. In addition, what may be a Quadrant II activity to an organization, such as long-term visioning, planning, and relationship building, may be Quadrant I to its top executive. This is his or her unique charge, the need for these things is great, and the consequences of either doing these things or not doing them is significant. The need for that executive is "now," it's urgent, and it must be acted on.

The value of the matrix is that it helps us to see how importance and urgency affect the choices we make about how to spend our time. It allows us to see where we spend most of our time and why we spend it there. We can also see that *the degree to which urgency is dominant is the degree to which importance is not*.