

All that is Urgent is not Important by Miska Hiltunen (30-Oct-06)

Urgency and importance are orthogonal concepts just like the X-axis and Y-axis are.

If we divide the urgency and importance axes in two, we end up with four quadrants: I (urgent and important), II (not urgent but important), III (urgent but not important) and IV (neither urgent nor important).

All the crises belong to **Quadrant I**. All emergencies are urgent and important. They have to be taken care of right now. There is no option. That fatal error the customer complained has to be corrected before the weekend. You can't leave these things undone, but you can choose how much time you devote to them. If you use all your time all the time for putting out fires, you will have no time to look for the pyromaniac starting them. If you allow it, **Quadrant I** will take all your time and more. **Quadrant I** will be the only one you work in. Your work will be guided by errors and driven by crises. You'll be reacting all the time.

Quadrant III contains meetings, phone calls and emails among other things. These things are urgent and require your attention either immediately or at a fixed time. It is important to realize that most meetings and phone calls and emails are not important. But if the phone rings and you answer, you let the possibly unimportant call disturb you and take your time. Not all emails are worth reading, and most don't require any action on your part. Just like **Quadrant I**, unimportant things can easily take up a major part of your time, if you let them.

No employee can keep working in **Quadrant IV** for long. If you waste your time only on unimportant and not urgent things, you'll be fired fast.

For quality, the most interesting quadrant is **Quadrant II** holding important but not urgent things. These are things you have to choose to do. You cannot just keep reacting, because there is no external trigger for these kinds of things. You have to be the trigger. That's why the Commitment to Quality states that "while quality is everybody's responsibility, it is most of all MY responsibility." All improvements belong to this category. Preventing bigger problems, like errors is something you have to choose to do. Performing regular **Tick-the-Code** Inspections is your choice. Nobody will force you. You have to realize and know that it is good for you. Not just for the organization but for YOU.

If you choose to work regularly in **Quadrant II**, you search for the pyromaniac setting your code on fire (making it unnecessarily complex) and sometimes you catch him. Each fire causes big problems for you in the form of errors, but just fighting the fires is a losing battle. You need to balance your life by working regularly in **Quadrant II**, making the **Quadrant I** smaller and smaller with time. You'll have to probably always keep on working in **Quadrant I** too, but your choice to use Quality Time regularly can help you make the relative size of **Quadrant I** diminish.

Be sure not to mix urgent automatically with important. Don't forget what's important. Errors are important and urgent to fix, **Tick-the-Code** Inspection is even more important to perform regularly, if you want more control in your working life.

More information in **Stephen R. Covey's** excellent book "*The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*". Remember, all that is important is not urgent.