Procrastination, Languishing, and Rework

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2008, published in the Houston Home Journal on Saturday, March 15, 2008

Leaders often ask for help with time management. Inevitably, my counsel leads to *First Things First* by Stephen Covey and Roger and Rebecca Merrill. Though the entire book is excellent, pages 32-43 on "Urgency Addiction" are where I frequently turn.

The distinction between "importance" and "urgency" is a critical awareness that allows you to evaluate your use of time. "Importance" refers to things you value and the outcomes you desire to accomplish. "Urgency" is defined by others, based on what they claim is important, especially in the short term. "Now" and "as soon as possible" are words typifying urgency.

Many in our culture are driven by the urgent demands from others. Being aware of what you value and the outcomes you desire to generate allow you to make better choices on how you use your time.

Important and urgent. Sometimes an issue is so critical, anyone would consider it an emergency. Many organizations function based on "crisis management." As soon as one disaster is handled, attention moves to address or minimize the next crisis.

Important but not urgent. Much of what deserves your attention doesn't have a deadline. You know you should do it, but nothing is driving you to address the situation. Such activities include preparation, planning, preventive maintenance, and building relationships. Inattention ultimately leads to urgency!

Not important but urgent. This is where much of the opportunity for improving time management is focused. The interruptions and the pressing issues that are right in front of you dictate your attention. You often feel that if you can just wade through the shallow sea of "stuff," then you can get on with what's really important. But when you complete one item, the next demand is waiting for you!

Not important and not urgent. Typically, when I describe this category, leaders say, "Oh, this is not a problem for me. I don't watch television, and I don't waste my time with other 'escape' activities."

Let me share a terrific new insight I gained this week. I felt some discomfort with my own performance. My analysis revealed that this fourth category of usage includes some deceiving time consumption.

When I've assessed use of time in the past, I typically evaluate explicit activities. However, I've concluded that the "not important and not urgent" category is where disguised time usage hides. Opportunities for improvement exist here that I've not considered before.

Suppose you spend time thinking about a task you should do, but you never quite get around to it. Those minutes spent procrastinating fit into this "not important and not urgent" category.

Let's say you complete a ten minute task, but it takes you twenty minutes. Into what category would you put the extra ten languishing minutes? (I never intend to be slothful, but I admit that I don't always work with full vigor and vitality! Mom called it "lollygagging." You might call it "taking your time.")

Imagine that you work on a project. Later, you learn that for quality reasons, you have to do it again. The rework might then be urgent, but those hours spent the first time are categorized somewhere!

Procrastination, languishing, and rework are detriments to the effective use of your time. I had applied only blatantly low-productivity behaviors into the "not important and not urgent" category. I am now also aware of these three hidden time consumers that are neither important nor urgent!

Examine yourself. Become aware of the extent to which your work is carelessly deferred, done with little intensity, or performed such that additional time will be required to improve its quality.

****

Dennis Hooper welcomes your thoughts on this perspective! Call him at (478)-988-0237. Also, take a look at his new website at **www.buildingfutureleaders.com**. Or e-mail him at dhooper2@juno.com.