

The Trap of Thinking Short-Term vs. Long-Term

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Do you struggle with time management? The demands never end and the “to do” list always seems longer than the time available to execute it.

If you are not familiar with Stephen Covey’s distinction between “important” and “urgent,” consider obtaining a copy of *First Things First*. The entire book is more readable than *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, and its treatment of time management is more thorough.

If you are pressed for time, focus your attention on Chapter 2, “The Urgency Addiction.” A couple of pages into the chapter is Covey’s four-quadrant layout of “importance” and “urgency.”

First Things First, despite its detail, doesn’t offer a succinct definition of those two terms. However, *Seven Habits* does. “Urgent means [the item] requires immediate attention....Urgent things act on us....Urgent matters are usually visible....They press on us....We react to urgent matters.”

“Important matters that are not urgent require more initiative, more proactivity. We must act to seize opportunity, to make things happen....things like building relationships, writing a personal mission statement, long-range planning, exercising, preventive maintenance, preparation—those things we know we need to do, but seldom get around to doing, because they aren’t urgent.”

How does this review (or introduction) relate to “short-term” or “long-term” thinking?

When we face any situation, we have multiple options we might pursue. When we make a decision and execute it, we set into motion resulting outcomes. Some are immediate (short-term). Some may not manifest for weeks, months, or even years (long-term).

A client and I were talking about the pressures on business leaders today to focus on short-term outcomes. As an engineer in a large, multi-national company, he recalled many excellent strategic projects being scuttled “to make this quarter’s numbers,” the repetitive explanation provided by the hierarchy. “We have to satisfy Wall Street” was the familiar refrain.

In reflecting on this conversation, I saw a correlation between focusing on short-term outcomes and the tendency to put our limited time and energy on urgent activities.

If you are a good problem-solver, you may tend to work on urgent items. They are the ones right in your face, demanding your attention. (“The squeaky wheel gets the grease.”)

If you seek immediate rewards, you tend to work on urgent items. Important items that aren’t urgent may provide beneficial returns on the effort expended, but the payout doesn’t come quickly.

If you are a person who prefers “easy,” you tend to work on urgent items. Important items require mental energy to prioritize and plan, and there usually isn’t any obvious “how to” provided to guide your systematic progress. Working for the long-term requires discipline; it’s not easy!

If you work alone, you may be seduced into working on urgent items. Action-oriented people make valuable independent producers, but engaging others requires planning and coordination, and that takes time. When you work alone, you are free to execute immediately any decision you make!

As a leader, it’s important (rarely urgent) to spend time reflecting on your recent patterns. Has an urgency focus or short-term thinking crept in? Is it time for a review of your long-term vision for your organization or even your personal life? I have found that it takes intentional, determined effort to keep your focus on what’s important and likely to lead to desirable long-term outcomes.