

Making space for important work. The Eisenhower Matrix.

By Donna Dark

“I have so much to do - so many tasks and projects that are all equally important...but where do I start?”

You may feel that you spend your day putting out one fire after another, and constantly fall behind on important deadlines. I call this being surrounded by “noise”.

If you want to reduce the noise and create the time (and headspace) for important work, try using The Eisenhower Matrix to prioritise your work. I was fortunate to be introduced to this method when working for IRT Group many years ago, and it is a method I still practice today. This article provides an overview of how it works.

The Eisenhower Matrix

Also called the Urgent-Important Matrix, the Eisenhower Matrix is a method to help you prioritise tasks by urgency and importance. This exercise also helps you to flush out tasks that you should delegate or re-assign to others, and the tasks you need to stop doing.

As the name suggests, Dwight D. Eisenhower, president of the United States (1953-1961) came up with the Eisenhower principle. He developed this principle during his time in the United States Army where was the Allied Forces Supreme Commander position during World War II, and later NATO’s first supreme commander. As you can imagine, during these years he had to make tough decisions with limited time to spare.

There are four quadrants in the matrix as follows.

1. Important and Urgent (Do first) Priority focus. Important tasks to be done same day.	2. Important, not Urgent (Do next) Important but not-so-urgent. These tasks should be scheduled.
3. Urgent but less important (Delegate) Delegate to others.	4. Not Important or Urgent (Stop doing) If it is not important or urgent – do not do it!

<https://www.eisenhower.me/eisenhower-matrix/>

Look back at your last week of activities and map them against the matrix, with examples of each quadrant below.

Quadrant 1 activities are essential for your role and for your team or service and what you should be focusing on completing today. This may include reviewing information or writing important report for your Manager with a deadline of today, or responding to unannounced visit outcome deadlines, reporting incidents, or anything with a fast- approaching deadline.

Quadrant 2 activities are also important, but not as urgent. They must be completed, but they can be scheduled for later. This could include preparing ahead to write up monthly reports, working on an improvement project or idea, or reviewing policy and procedures after a change in practice or regulation. Quadrant 2 activities can easily become important and urgent (Q1 activities) if you do not schedule them in and stay focused on completing them when scheduled.

Quadrant 3 activities are less important for your role, but often urgent for other people. Examples of these tasks are where you might get asked by a colleague to attend a meeting to fill in for another person at the last minute, or someone has asked for a favour to get some information they need.

If you assess that your presence is not essential, or that the information requested can be found elsewhere, try suggesting an alternative suitable person to attend the meeting, or direct the person as to where to find the information they need so that they can follow up themselves.

This is not about “passing the buck”. Think critically about what is essential for you to be focusing on, and how you can help the person requesting your assistance to still complete their important and urgent task. Think about how you would like to be treated if the roles were reversed.

Quadrant 4 activities are typically what you may be doing to procrastinate when you are supposed to be completing planned Quadrant 2 tasks. This includes rewriting to-do lists, checking for new emails constantly throughout the day, and using/checking social media.

There may also be tasks falling into this quadrant in your daily work that are simply no longer required. This may be due to a new automated process or change in requirements. Letting go of these creates more space for important work.

3. Develop a plan of action – and start!

The most important thing is to start today. Find a method that works for you to plan out your day and weeks. This might be electronic or paper-based, so long as it works for you.

Practice and keep practising- as we know it will take time to develop and sustain this new way of working.

Be transparent about activities that are important for you and your role. Listen to others talk about what is important for them to achieve and discuss how you can support each other to stay focused.

Persisting and refining your priorities will create space for the important and urgent activities to be dealt with, and support you to complete important, longer term pieces of work that make a difference for consumers, your team, organisation, and your career. Most importantly this method may also help in reducing stress while increasing your sense of achievement, so why not give it a go?

To find out more about The Eisenhower Matrix:

<https://www.eisenhower.me/eisenhower-matrix/>