FIRST THINGS FIRST

To Live, to Love, to Learn, to Leave a Legacy

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2: *The Urgency Addiction*

Anything less than
a conscious commitment to the important
is an unconscious commitment
to the unimportant.

AS we begin this chapter, take a moment to consider your answer to the following questions:

*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?*

*If you **know** these things would make such a significant difference, why are you not doing them now?*

As you consider your response, let's look at the two primary factors that drive our choices concerning how we use our time: *urgency* and *importance*. Although we deal with both factors, one of them is the basic paradigm through which we view our time and our lives.

The fourth generation is based on the "importance" paradigm. Knowing and doing what's important rather than simply responding to what's urgent is foundational to putting first things first.

As you go through this chapter, we'll ask you to examine your own paradigms carefully. Whether you're operating from a paradigm of urgency or one of importance has a profound effect on the results you're getting in your life.

URGENCY

Few of us realize how powerfully urgency affects our choices. The phone rings. The baby cries. Someone knocks at the door. A deadline approaches.

"I need this *now*."

"I'm in a jam, can you come right over?"

"You're late for your appointment."

How much does urgency control your life? We'd like to suggest that you take a few moments and look at some of the attitudes and behaviors that grow out of it as reflected in the Urgency Index on the following page. The degree to which you relate to the statements in the Index will give you some idea of the extent to which you may be looking at life through a paradigm of urgency. As you read each statement, mark the number on the continuum that best describes your response.

After going through the Index, add up your total score and measure yourself with the following key:

0–25	Low urgency mind-set
26–45	Strong urgency mind-set
46+	Urgency addiction

If most of your responses are on the low end, the urgency paradigm is probably not a significant factor in your life. If they're in the middle or toward the higher end, there's a good chance urgency is your fundamental operational paradigm. If your responses are consistently high, urgency may be more than just the way you see. It may actually be an addiction.

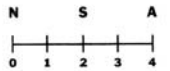
THE URGENCY ADDICTION

Some of us get so used to the adrenaline rush of handling crises that we become dependent on it for a sense of excitement and energy. How does urgency feel? Stressful? Pressured? Tense? Exhausting? Sure. But let's be honest. It's also sometimes exhilarating. We feel useful. We feel successful. We feel validated. And we get good at it. Whenever there's trouble, we ride into town, pull out our six shooter, do the varmit in, blow the smoke off the gun barrel, and ride into the sunset like a hero. It brings instant results and instant gratification.

We get a temporary high from solving urgent and important crises. Then when the importance isn't there, the urgency fix is so powerful

The Urgency Index©

Circle the number along the matrix that most closely represents your normal behaviors or attitudes regarding the statements at the left (0=Never, 2=Sometimes, 4=Always).



1. I seem to do my best work when I'm under pressure.
2. I often blame the rush and press of external things for my failure to spend deep, introspective time with myself.
3. I'm often frustrated by the slowness of people and things around me. I hate to wait or stand in line.
4. I feel guilty when I take time off work.
5. I always seem to be rushing between places and events.
6. I frequently find myself pushing people away so that I can finish a project.
7. I feel anxious when I'm out of touch with the office for more than a few minutes.
8. I'm often preoccupied with one thing when I'm doing something else.
9. I'm at my best when I'm handling a crisis situation.
10. The adrenaline rush from a new crisis seems more satisfying to me than the steady accomplishment of long-term results.
11. I often give up quality time with important people in my life to handle a crisis.
12. I assume people will naturally understand if I have to disappoint them or let things go in order to handle a crisis.
13. I rely on solving some crisis to give my day a sense of meaning and purpose.
14. I often eat lunch or other meals while I work.
15. I keep thinking that someday I'll be able to do what I really want to do.
16. A huge stack in my "out" basket at the end of the day makes me feel like I've really been productive.

we are drawn to do anything urgent, just to stay in motion. People expect us to be busy, overworked. It's become a status symbol in our society—if we're busy, we're important; if we're not busy, we're almost embarrassed to admit it. Busyness is where we get our security. It's validating, popular, and pleasing. It's also a good excuse for not dealing with the first things in our lives.

"I'd love to spend quality time with you, but I have to work. There's this deadline. It's urgent. Of course you understand."

"I just don't have time to exercise. I know it's important, but there are so many pressing things right now. Maybe when things slow down a little."

Urgency addiction is a self-destructive behavior that temporarily fills the void created by unmet needs. And instead of meeting these needs, the tools and approaches of time management often feed the addiction. They keep us focused on daily prioritization of the urgent.

Addiction to urgency is every bit as dangerous as other commonly recognized dependencies. The following list of characteristics comes out of recovery literature not even connected with time management. It deals primarily with addiction to such things as chemical substances, gambling, and overeating. But look at the similarities![1]

The Addictive Experience

1. Creates predictable, reliable sensations
2. Becomes the primary focus and absorbs attention
3. Temporarily eradicates pain and other negative sensations
4. Provides artificial sense of self-worth, power, control, security, intimacy, accomplishment
5. Exacerbates the problems and feelings it is sought to remedy
6. Worsens functioning, creates loss of relationships

How well these characteristics describe urgency addiction! And our society is literally inundated with it. Everywhere we turn, urgency addiction is reinforced in our lives and in our culture.

Roger: At one of our programs, I'd just gone through the Urgency Index with a group of senior executives from a multinational firm. At the break, the senior manager from Australia came up to me with a wry smile on his face. "I can't believe it!" he exclaimed. "I am absolutely addicted! It's the whole culture of our business. We live from crisis to crisis. Nothing ever gets done until somebody says it's urgent."

As he was speaking, the number two man in his operation came up beside him and nodded his head in agreement. They joked about their situation for a minute, but their joking had a serious undertone. Then the senior manager turned to me and said, "You know, when this man joined our company, he wasn't that way. But now he is too."

His eyes opened wide with sudden realization. "You know what?" he asked. "I'm not only an addict—I'm a pusher!"

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're doing really needs to be done. As a result, we exacerbate the gap between the compass and the clock. As Charles Hummel observes in his booklet, *Tyranny of the Urgent:*

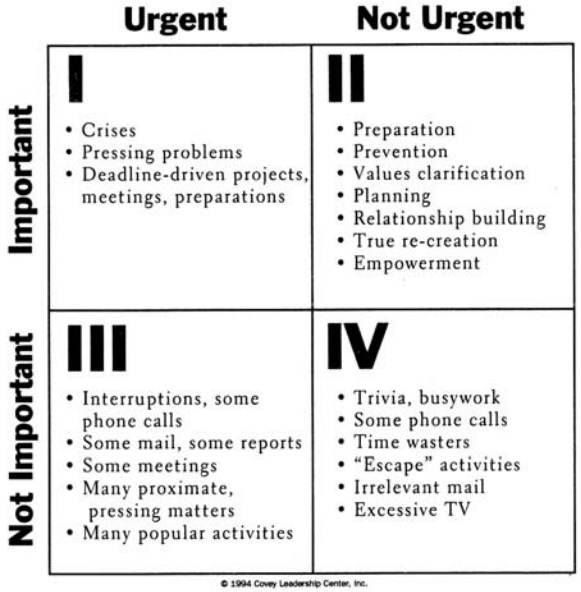
The important task rarely must be done today, or even this week. . . . The urgent task calls for instant action. . . . The momentary appeal of these tasks seems irresistible and important, and they devour our energy. But in the light of time's perspective, their deceptive prominence fades; with a sense of loss we recall the vital task we pushed aside. We realize we've become slaves to the tyranny of the urgent.[2]

Many of the traditional time management tools actually feed the addiction. 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 the 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 four quadrants. We spend time in one of these four ways:



Quadrant I represents things that are both "urgent" and "important." 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 Quality. 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 on 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 fountain 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's 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 these 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 at the first of the 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 organizing
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 aren't 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 home. 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 would live with 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 the 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 to Quadrant II. Both Quadrant I and Quadrant II describe what's 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 in 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 are 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.*

ON THE FAR SIDE OF COMPLEXITY

Like chemical abuse, urgency addiction is a temporary painkiller used in excess. It relieves some of the acute pain caused by the gap between the compass and the clock. And the relief may feel good at the time. But it's cotton-candy satisfaction. It quickly evaporates. And the pain remains. Simply doing more faster fails to get at the chronic causes, the underlying issues, the *reason* for the pain. It's doing second (or third or fourth) things faster . . . but doing nothing to really solve the chronic pain that comes from not putting first things first.

To get at the chronic issues requires a different kind of thinking. It's like the difference between "prevention" and "treatment" thinking in medicine. Treatment deals with the acute or the painful level of illness; prevention deals with lifestyle issues and the maintenance of health. These are two different paradigms, and even though a doctor may operate out of both paradigms, one paradigm usually predominates.

Stephen: I've had physicals from doctors who operate out of both paradigms, and they are altogether different. They're looking for different things. For example, I've had doctors who operate primarily out of the treatment paradigm look at my blood chemistry and report that because the total cholesterol was less than 200, I was okay. I've had doctors with a prevention paradigm look at the blood chemistry—particularly the LDL/HDL/total cholesterol ratio—and say that I was not okay, that I was in a moderate risk area, and prescribe a regimen of exercise, diet, and medication.

Most of us realize that a good percentage of the health problems we have are lifestyle-related. Without an extreme "wake-up call," such as a heart attack, many of us live in a rescue fantasy. We live the way we want to live—little or no exercise, poor nutrition, burning the candle at both ends—and when we have a problem, we expect the medical profession to pick up the pieces. While we may be able to diminish the pain with prescriptions and Band-Aids, if we're really going to

make a difference, we need to go to the underlying root cause of the pain. We need to attend to prevention in a profound way.

The same is true in all areas of our lives. As Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "I wouldn't give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity; I would give my right arm for the simplicity on the far side of complexity." [3] The simplistic answers on this side of complexity do not address the full reality we're in. They may give a sense of being quick and easy, but their promise is empty. And most people know it. It's our experience that people are tired of the Band-Aids and aspirin offered by quick-fix solutions and personality ethic techniques. They want to address and resolve the chronic issues that keep them from putting first things first in their lives.

In the following chapter, we'd like to go beyond the acute pain of the problems we've talked about in Chapters 1 and 2 and into the chronic, underlying causes. We'd like to move through the heart of complexity, through the full reality that impacts our time and the quality of our lives. The three ideas in Chapter 3 may challenge your thinking, but we encourage you to pay the price and interact with these ideas on a deep personal level. We believe they will affirm a deeper knowing that transcends your paradigms and will empower you to create maps that accurately describe the territory.

Out of these ideas—on the far side of complexity—come the simple and powerful paradigms and processes in Section Two that will empower you to more effectively put first things first in your life.