

CHAPTER 4

Consider the Consequences

"Every man has become great; every successful man has succeeded, in proportion as he has confined his powers to one particular channel."

Orison Swett Marden

The mark of the superior thinker is his or her ability to accurately predict the consequences of doing or not doing something. The potential consequences of any task or activity are the key determinants of how important it really is to you and to your company. This way of evaluating the significance of a task is how you determine what your next frog really is.

Doctor Edward Banfield of Harvard University, after more than 50 years of research, concluded that "long-time perspective" is the most accurate single predictor of upward social and economic mobility in America. Long time perspective turns out to be more important than family background, education, race, intelligence, connections or virtually any other single factor in determining your success in life and at work.

Your attitude toward time, your "time horizon," has an enormous impact on your behavior and your choices. People who take the long view of their lives and careers always seem to make much better decisions about their time and activities than people who give very little thought to the future.

Rule: "Long-term thinking improves short-term decision making."

Successful people have a clear *future-orientation*. They think five, ten and twenty years out into the future. They analyze their choices and behaviors in the present to make sure that what they are doing today is consistent with the long-term future that they desire.

Make Better Decisions about Time

In your work, having a clear idea of what is really important to you in the long-term makes it much easier for you to make better decisions about your priorities in the short-term.

By definition, something that is important has long-term potential consequences. Something that is unimportant has few or no long-term potential consequences. Before starting on anything, you should always ask yourself, "*What are the potential consequences of doing or not doing this task?*"

Rule: "Future intent influences and often determines present actions."

The clearer you are about your future intentions, the greater influence that clarity will have on what you do in the moment. With a clear long-term vision, you are much more capable of evaluating an activity in the present and to assure that it is consistent with where you truly want to end up.

Think about the Long Term

Successful people are those who are willing to delay gratification and make sacrifices in the short term so that they can enjoy far greater rewards in the long term. Unsuccessful people, on the other hand, think more about short-term pleasure and immediate gratification while giving little thought to the long-term future.

Dennis Waitley, the motivational speaker, says, "Failures do what is *tension relieving* while winners do what is *goal achieving*."

For example, coming in to work earlier, reading regularly in your field, taking courses to improve your skills, and focusing on high value tasks in your work will all combine to have an enormous positive impact on your future.

On the other hand, coming in to work at the last moment, reading the newspaper, drinking coffee and socializing with your coworkers may seem fun and enjoyable in the short-term but it inevitably leads to lack of promotion, underachievement and frustration in the long-term.

If there is a task or activity with large potential positive consequences, make it a top priority and get started on it immediately. If there is something that can have large potential negative consequences if it is not done quickly and well, that becomes a top priority as well. Whatever your frog is, resolve to gulp it down first thing.

Motivation requires *motive*. The greater the positive potential impact that an action or behavior of yours can have on your life, once you define it clearly, the more motivated you will be to overcome procrastination and get it done quickly.

Keep yourself focused and forward moving by continually starting and completing those tasks that can make a major difference to your company and to your future.

Remember, the time is going to pass anyway. The only question is how you use it and where you are going to end up at the end of the weeks and months. And where you end up is largely a matter of the amount of consideration you give to the likely consequences of your actions in the short term.

Thinking continually about the potential consequences of your choices, decisions and behaviors is one of the very best ways to determine your true priorities in your work and personal life.

Obey the Law of Forced Efficiency

This law says that, "There is never enough time to do everything, but there is always enough time to do the most important thing."

Put another way, you cannot eat every tadpole and frog in the pond, but you can eat the biggest and ugliest one, and that will be enough, at least for the time being.

When you run out of time and the consequences for non-completion of a key task or project can be really serious, you always seem to find the time to get it done, often at the very last minute. When you have no choice, when the consequences for non-completion are serious enough, you start early, you stay late and you drive yourself to complete the job rather than to face the unpleasantness that would follow if you didn't get it completed within the time limit.

Rule: "There will never be enough time to do everything you have to do."

It has been estimated that the average person in business today, especially managers in the age of cutbacks, is working at 110% to 130% of capacity. And the jobs and responsibilities just keep piling up. Everyone has stacks of reading material they still have to go through. One study concluded recently that the average executive has 300-400 hours of reading and projects backlogged at home and at the office.

What this means is that you will **never** be caught up. Get that wonderful idea out of your mind. All you can hope for is to be on top of your most important responsibilities. The others will just have to wait.

Deadlines Are an Excuse

Many people say that they work better under the pressure of deadlines. Unfortunately, years of research indicate that this is seldom true.

Under the pressure of deadlines, often self-created through procrastination and delay, people suffer greater stress, make more mistakes, and have to do redo more tasks, than under any other conditions. Often the mistakes that are made when people are working under tight deadlines lead to defects and cost overruns that lead to substantial financial losses in the long-term. Sometimes the job actually takes much longer to complete when people rush to get the job done at the last minute and then have to redo it.

It is much better to plan your time carefully in advance, and then build in a sizable buffer to compensate for unexpected delays and diversions. However much time you think a task will take, add on another 20% or more, or make a game of getting in done well in advance of the deadline. You will be amazed at how much more relaxed you are, and how much better a job you do.

Three Questions for Maximum Productivity

There are three questions that you can use on a regular basis to keep yourself focused on getting your most important tasks completed on schedule. The first question is *"What are my highest value activities?"*

Put another way, what are the biggest frogs that you have to eat to make the greatest contribution to your organization? To your family? To your life in general?

This is one of the most important questions you can ask and answer. What are your highest value activities? First, think this through for yourself. Then, ask your boss. Ask your coworkers and subordinates. Ask your friends and family. Like focusing the lens of a camera, you must be crystal clear about your highest value activities before you begin work.

The second question you can ask continually is, *"What can I and only I do, that if done well, will make a real difference?"*

This question comes from Peter Drucker, the management guru. It is one of the best of all questions for achieving personal effectiveness. What can you, and only you do, that if done well, can make a real difference?

This is defined something that *only* you can do. If you don't do it, it won't be done by someone else. But if you do do it, and you do it well, it can really make a difference to your life and your career. What is this particular frog for you?

Every hour of every day, you can ask yourself this question and there will be a specific answer. Your job is to be clear about the answer and then to start and work on this task before anything else.

The third question you can ask is *"What is the most valuable use of my time, right now?"*

What is my biggest frog of all *at this moment?*

This is the core question of time management. Answering this question correctly is the key to overcoming procrastination and becoming a highly productive person. Every hour of every day, there is some task that is the most valuable use of your time at that moment. Your job is to ask yourself this question, over and over again, and to always be working on the answer to it, whatever it is.

Do first things first and second things not at all. As Goethe said, *"The things that matter most must never be at the mercy of the things that matter least."*

The more accurate your answers to these questions, the easier it will be for you to set clear priorities, to overcome procrastination and to get started on that one activity that represents the most valuable use of your time.

Eat That Frog!

1. Review your list of tasks, activities and projects regularly.

Continually ask yourself, "Which one project or activity, if I did it in an excellent and timely fashion, would have the greatest positive consequences in my work or personal life?"

2. Determine the most important things you could be doing every hour of every day, and then discipline yourself to work continually on the most valuable use of your time. What is this for you, right now?

Whatever it is that can help you the most, set it as a goal, make a plan to achieve it and go to work on your plan immediately. Remember the wonderful words of Goethe, *"Just begin and the mind grows heated; continue, and the task will be completed!"*