

articles

This article explains how Stephen Covey's 4 Quadrant Decision Base can help you be more effective. You'll discover the difference between efficient and effective.

# Use your brain and manage your time

It is a truth universally acknowledged (or very widely, anyway) that good time management and prioritising our activities are key to helping achieve high pay-off results. It's also true that too often it can be difficult to focus and stay on track – especially when things are really busy. At that point it's all too easy to simply react to the loudest demands and lose sight of what's important.

In this article, we draw on the work of *7 Habits*<sup>1</sup> guru, Stephen Covey, who has done more than anyone to help people – from frontline workers to chief executives – to be more effective, to gain real control of their time and learn how to avoid devoting themselves to merely 'busy' work. Or as Covey so succinctly puts it:

**“The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.”**

<sup>1</sup> Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Simon & Schuster – first published 1989 and never out of print since.

## Don't panic

Despite all the precipitate advances in technology and communication in the workplace over the past couple of decades – designed to make our work smoother, faster, and more efficient – it feels as though we get less done. We are swept away by a torrent of emails and attachments, knocked off course by interruptions and phone calls, and bogged down in the daily scramble to achieve more with fewer and fewer resources.

And the pressure doesn't end when you leave work. You still need to get on the right train, get home on time, run errands, feed the children, go to the gym, study for the course that's definitely going to make life better and, maybe, find time to watch the first episode of the box set you were so pleased to be given for your birthday – two years ago.

All of this leaves us feeling overwhelmed, overworked and over stimulated – and even less able to get things done. More coffee and adding more apps to your phone to manage your time is not the answer. Take a deep breath and follow Douglas Adams' advice: **Don't Panic.**<sup>2</sup> Panic is not a useful way to manage the resource that will help you think your way out of the situation – your brain.

## Take control

Covey says the single biggest thing that separates achievers from non-achievers is the ability to be clear on what is important, what matters the most, and then take action accordingly. So rather than panicking, try this.

### **Step 1: Think: What do I want?**

The most important step in taking control, is setting goals: being really clear what you want from life – your whole life and not just your working life. A goal is not something you 'do', it is something you *achieve*. What are the five things at home and five things at work you want to accomplish in the next two years? Don't hold yourself back by worrying about what is possible. See this as a wish list. What you *want* to happen.

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas Adams, The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, Pan

## **Step 2: Think: What matters the most?**

Having generated this list of possibilities you then have to identify which of them will make a substantial contribution your life. To help you decide where you should concentrate your energies, use the Pareto Principle or 80/20 rule. Payoff is key – where are the high payoff activities? Go back over your goals, and decide which ones will have the highest impact and help you the most. Label them A, B, C – with A the highest and C the lowest. They are all important of course, but which stand out the most? Take control, and let at least one of them be a C.

High work payoffs are most often expressed as Key Result Areas or KRAs. KRAs are *outputs* – ‘ensure everyone who runs a cost centre is on target,’ and not *inputs* – ‘draft quarterly budgets with colleagues.’ Increasingly, job descriptions are written as KRAs, rather than a list of activities. If you don’t have KRAs – or what you have are actually inputs – try explaining your job under four or five headline areas. For example:

**‘to deliver outstanding customer service’**

**‘to be a supportive manager’**

**‘to engage volunteers in fundraising’**

Pay close attention to the verbs you use. Are they accurate? Now A, B, C your KRAs. Which is the *most important* aspect of your work? What will deliver the *greatest impact*?

## **Prioritise and focus**

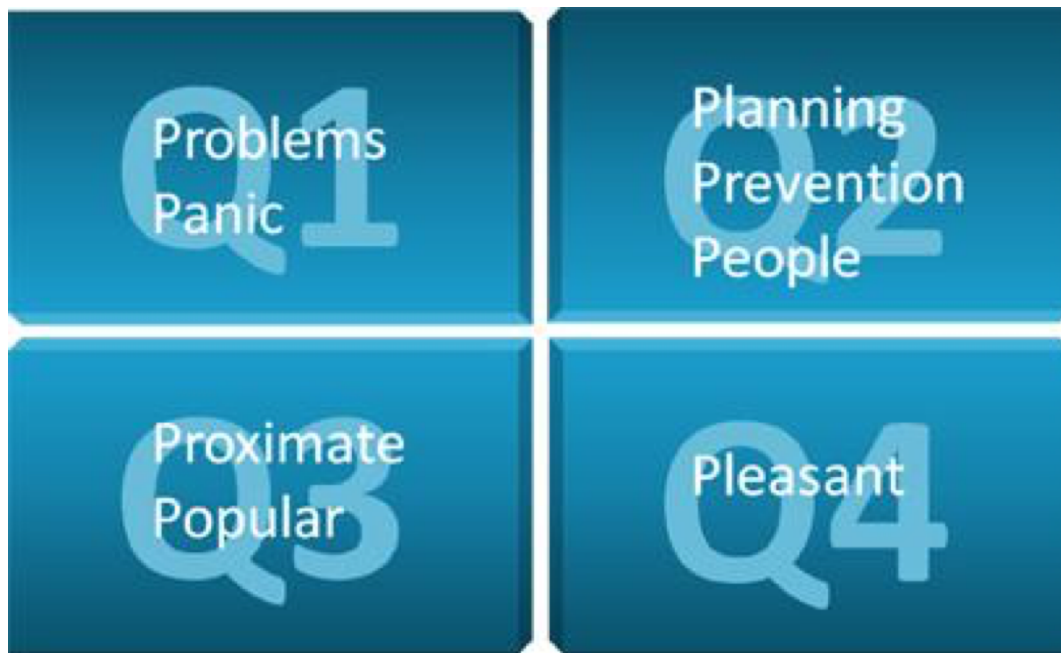
Once you know what is most important, you are ready for the next step.

## **Step 3: Get focussed – spend enough time on important things**

We can characterise any activity in terms of its importance and urgency. An *important* task is one whose completion would significantly contribute to an individual’s or organisation’s key aims and objectives – or KRA. An *urgent* task is defined by Covey as one that ‘appears to require immediate attention’. Note the word ‘appears’. Somebody interrupts you at your desk with a question. The phone rings. A little window pops up on your screen announcing the arrival of yet more emails. All of these place an immediate demand on your time, but they may not actually require your attention straight away. They are urgent... but are they important?

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Covey's matrix shows all the combinations of urgent and important:



- **Quadrant 1 – Problems, Panic:** the tasks outlined in Q1 are both *important* and *urgent*, and typically this means panic or problems. All these things appear to require immediate attention and really do require immediate attention. What happened for you in Q1 today?
- **Quadrant 2 – Planning, Prevention, People:** these tasks are *important* but *not urgent*. Completing them would make a significant contribution to your KRAs and goals, but you can easily get away with not doing them today (because they're not urgent). Tomorrow will be fine. Or even next week... What on your list could be Q2? What could you be doing around planning or prevention?
- **Quadrant 3 – Proximate, Popular:** these tasks are *urgent* but *not important*. They seek us out – phone calls, emails, interruptions, a report with a short deadline landing in your in-tray – and often don't relate to our own KRAs or goals. They may well belong to someone else, anxious to pass them on, and saying yes can make us feel popular. Have you spent time helping someone with their problem today?
- **Quadrant 4 – Pleasant:** these tasks are *neither urgent nor important*. In Q4 we are idly surfing the web, flicking through magazines, chatting at the water cooler.

The secret of success in using Covey's 4 Quadrants is not to try to spend every second of every day in Q1 and Q2, but rather to make adjustments *and be aware of where you are spending time*. Covey is a realistic kind of guy. He doubts most of us are spending much time at all in Q4, and there's only so much time we can spend in Q1 without a break. The world's a messy place, not-for-profits are no exception. The key to personal effectiveness is to cut back on the time we devote to tasks in Q3 and to shift that time to Q2. So, rather than saying 'yes' to every appeal or distraction, challenge yourself to focus on the *importance* of what's being asked. In other words, 'exercise integrity in the moment of choice.' Take moment before you choose to start a task to ask yourself, "is this the most important thing I can be doing right now? Or is it just the next thing?"

Covey argues that consistently spending even 1% more time in Q2 will start to have a significant impact on our lives. A bit more time thinking ahead and building relationships should help prevent crises from happening in Q1, allowing us more valuable time in Q2. Focusing on the important rather than just the urgent tasks can leave us with the lasting satisfaction that today we have made the biggest difference we could in our role. And isn't that why we work in this sector?

Three steps:

- Set out what you want to achieve.
- Decide what will have the biggest impact.
- Make sure you spend sufficient time on that and not somewhere else.

Let's leave the last word with Stephen Covey:

**“If you want small changes in your life, work on your attitude. But if you want big and primary changes, work on your paradigm.”**

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## What's Next?

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