



## Urgency or Importance — Which Rules Your Day?

**Poka-yoke your time — filter out the urgent so you can work on what is important.**

As a manager, as a supervisor, we are often driven by the “tyranny of the urgent.” That phone call that just came in, that rush order that “just has to get out,” or a host of other compelling things that insist “Get it done — **now!**” But is our obedience to the urgent even worth it? Perhaps as leaders, we need to recalibrate our reflexive obedience to the tyranny of the urgent, and instead invest in developing processes that make urgency a thing of the past.

One of the advantages of working at PMPA is that we get to collaborate with colleagues, members and truly talented, smart people. So, when this topic of urgency versus importance was brought up, I was pleased to hear PMPA’s Carli Kistler-Miller’s immediate impression: “You know, Miles, these are not mutually exclusive.” I can agree, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but I hope to show that when they are, we should not give our service to the urgent.

Urgency is characterized by two characteristics:

1) Urgency is time denominated. If urgent items are not completed by a certain time — a deadline (how telling) — then they cannot be completed at all. 2) The tasks are not necessarily thoughtful or cognitive work. In our everyday language we define urgency as “putting out fires.” It is interesting to me that the word comes from the Latin “urgendum,” which means “to press hard, to urge.” We can see from this fact that urgency is generally delivering for single constituency or beneficiary. An urgent need is literally, a “pressing” one. Synonyms for urgency include emergency, critical and desperate. It is the time limit that raises the emotional stakes for urgency.

Urgency, upon reflection, is a short-term focus. By definition, if the urgent task is not completed by the deadline, it is a failure. We are all motivated, incentivized, coached and counseled to avoid failure. No wonder that

urgency is such a powerful tyrant, and we its obedient servants.

Importance is different from urgent in that, while important work may have a deadline, the deadline itself is not an aspect of importance. Importance suggests great significance — especially to the greater organization and all of its stakeholders. Synonyms of importance, which can help us see its meaning more clearly include vital, necessary and crucial. Interestingly, the synonyms for importance do not suggest being time-bound. They do, however, suggest great value or meaningfulness.

So, why is it that we permit urgency to dictate importance in our work lives? The time deadline is an obvious answer because if we fail to complete the urgent task by the deadline, we cannot complete it at all. But is there more? Henry Mintzberg cited a 1956 study by Robert Guest, “Of Time and Foremen,” in *Harvard Business Review* that established that 56 foremen averaged 583 activities per eight-hour shift, an average of one activity every 48 seconds. Mintzberg describes the work pace for chief executives as “unrelenting.” If our management is so tied up doing the urgent, who is doing the important?

If an urgent task is being completed every 48 seconds, when does the important work get done? (Note: This was in 1956, before cell phones and email. Do we really think that the demands have decreased in urgency? If anything, these new technologies have raised the bar and shortened the deadlines.)

Another study of 160 British middle and top managers found, according to Mintzberg, that they worked without interruption for a half-hour or more only about once every two days. Again, this was before internet, email and cell phones. Urgency, it seems, is a feature — not a bug — in managerial and supervisory work.



Our highest and best use, regardless of our organizational title in our shops, is to continuously improve our processes and performance. How much time is left in our eight-hour shift (*wink, wink, nudge, nudge*) for continuous improvement? How much time is left for the other important, high-value work that is ours and ours alone, as leaders, managers and supervisors? How much quality time is the tyranny of the urgent stealing from us as loving parents, siblings and good friends?

It is my observation that things move from important to urgent when our systems and processes fail. But rather than address our system failures directly, we respond, like conditioned subjects in a psychology experiment, to respond to the urgent stimulus.

Quality is the absence of waste. When we focus on the merely urgent, allowing them to fill our day, we are stealing our highest and best work from our company, from our team and from our loved ones. Track the urgent issues that are stealing your attention and efforts from what is truly important. I am convinced that if we spent just 10% more time on the important, rather than the urgent, our shops would be even more productive, profitable and even happier places to work. It is time for a revolution to remove the tyrant of urgency in our lives.

Do not let the deadline of time bully you into spending your precious time doing the urgent, rather than the important. Time is the greatest waste as it is truly unrecoverable. Poka-yoke your time. Filter it by urgency to target the processes needing improvement. Identify, improve, change or eliminate the processes that are creating needless urgency in your company. Celebrate the processes and the people that drive the processes and deliver the important work without urgency, hysterics or emotional blackmail.

Urgency gives us that psychology experiment reward in the short term. But have we done the emotional and business multivariate calculus as to what it is truly costing us and our performers in the long run?

And as for whether urgency and importance are mutually exclusive, I will have to wait until my colleague Carli comes back from her well-earned vacation. **P**

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