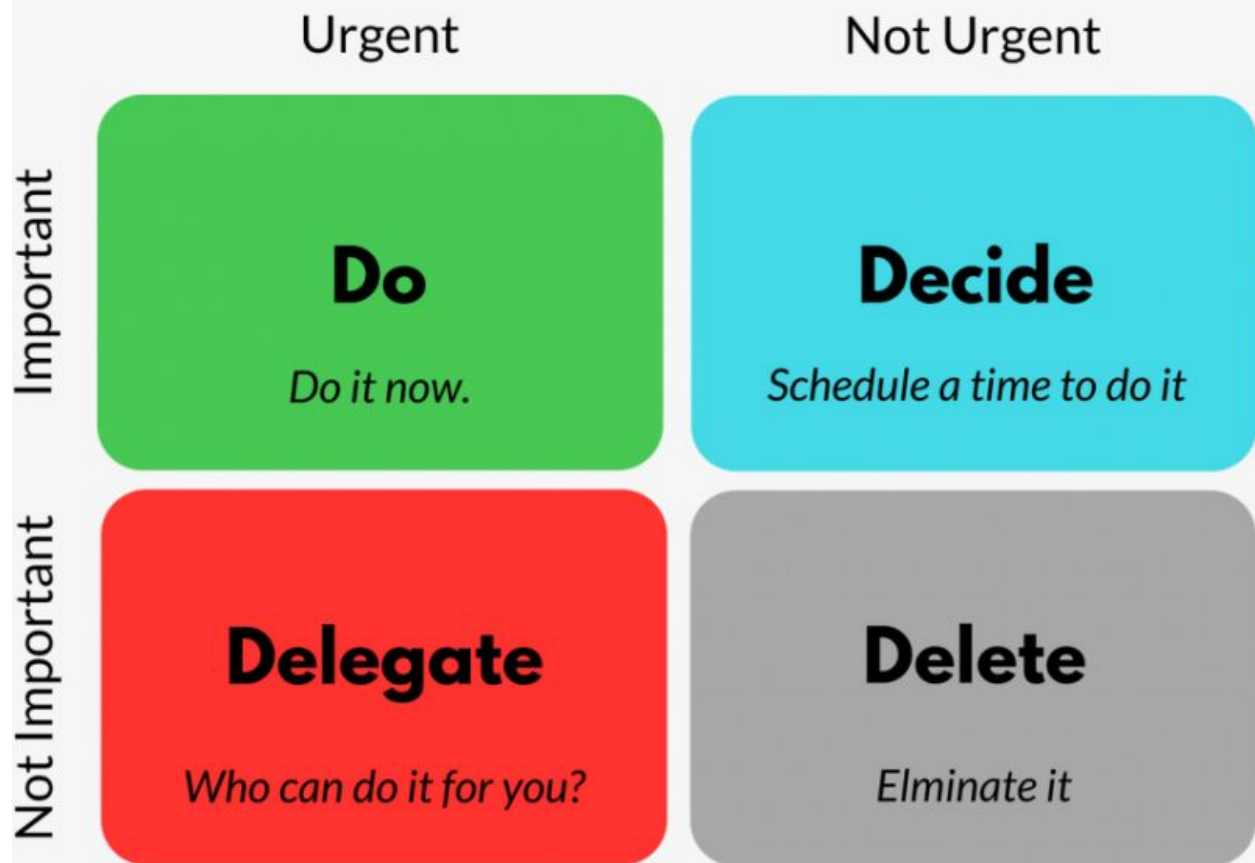


Never Get Treed by a Chihuahua: Prioritize What is Important

Effective leaders can separate the urgent from the important. I have not always been successful at doing that. About 25 years ago, I was working in the hardest job I had ever had (at least up to that point). I was burning both ends of the candle and never seemed to be able to get everything done. My commanding officer found me struggling late one night and gave me some great advice: “You need to get your priorities straight, and you need to learn how to separate the urgent from the important.” That’s the day I started learning how to decide which tasks really demanded my attention and which ones I could ignore. I also started learning how to get more effective at delegation.

Tasks don’t always fit neatly into a box. One tool I’ve used to help others understand the difference between urgent tasks and important ones is the Eisenhower Decision Matrix. Dwight D. Eisenhower was unusually productive throughout his life: he led the allied invasion of Normandy in WWII, was the Army Chief of Staff, and was the President of Columbia University prior to serving as the 34th US President. He generally followed this system to help him sort tasks and decide what he was going to focus on. President Eisenhower understood that if we constantly busy ourselves with urgent tasks, we will never allocate sufficient time and thought to the more important, long-range concerns. This is one example of the matrix he used:

The Eisenhower Decision Matrix



The key idea is that the effective leader's focus is always on important concerns: If the important task is also urgent, then it should be completed now. If it is not urgent, one should plan when and how to focus on it, and allocate sufficient time. An effective leader simply does not focus at all on the unimportant items. Instead, he or she delegates to others the authority to act or ignores them altogether.

How does one decide what is important? I thought about this a great deal, especially on the "professional" side of my life. Every single day I had so many tasks that I could have taken on, and the sheer volume of things I "needed to get done" was overwhelming. I then decided that only if a task fell into one of three categories it was truly important. Those categories are:

1. The task is directly related to the organization's core mission or reason for existence.

2. The task is derived from or follows my supervisor's guidance or intent.
3. The task is focused on helping the development or welfare of one of my subordinates.

If the task did not fit into one of those three categories, I deemed it "not important" and I either delegated the task to somebody else or I deleted it.

Prioritization is also useful on the personal side of our lives. Many people struggle and their lives get out of balance. A friend once told me that he uses his five fingers to prioritize what he does. His priorities are: self, faith, family, job, and friends. It seemed strange to me that he would list himself first, especially since in this case, he is one of the most selfless, giving people I have ever known. He told me that he just ensures that he is taking care of himself by eating right, sleeping, and exercising so that poor health does not limit his ability to focus on others. Are those exact priorities right for everyone? Nope. The main point is to think about it, establish the priorities that are right for you, and then focus on what is truly important. Don't let the urgent things dominate your life.

Another friend was fond of saying "Never get treed by a Chihuahua." I think he had it right. Those pesky ankle-biters may make a lot of noise, but they should not distract us from our goals.