Urgent/Important Matrix

This is a tool for planning and prioritising so you can spend more time on important things and less on low added value activities.

Think about all the typical activities you do in a week or a month, write each one on a post-it note and then pin them on to the appropriate box (see diagram on the next page). Categorise them as follows:

1. Fire fighting – things that are urgent and important and you are constantly reacting to them – eg a customer complaint, a machine breakdown.
2. False alarms – things that seem urgent, but are not important – eg when someone says to you "we've got a problem" or "we need a meeting".
3. Fire escapes – things that are not urgent nor important – eg chatting at the coffee machine, doing emails, surfing the net.
4. Fire prevention – things that are important but not urgent, so they tend not to get done, because we are too busy fire-fighting – eg putting processes in place so that problems are solved once and for all and do not recur.

If we spent more time on fire prevention, there would be less fire-fighting to do and most of us would feel happier at work. (Admittedly, there are some people who like to spend their lives dealing with crises and fire-fighting, but most of us prefer a more planned and managed approach).

Fire prevention often seems like it is "too hard". It is sometimes easier to be reactive and deal with each crisis as it arises rather than planning ahead to make time to think longer term and put corrective actions in place so that the same problems do not recur. However, it is worth the effort and leads to less frustration and more satisfaction at work.

Another way to use this matrix is to monitor your time during a day. Each time something happens, or you are asked by someone else to do something, before you do it, think about which box it is in. At the end of the day, see how much time you have spent on the important things, the urgent things, or in the fire escapes.

Essenwood Consulting

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