COMMENTARY

The Illusion of Urgency

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Faculty frequently have many tasks that need to be completed on a daily basis. Prioritizing these tasks effectively can be challenging, especially considering the relative urgency and importance of each. Decision matrices such as the Eisenhower Matrix and the Time Management Matrix can assist individuals in categorizing tasks in order to value what is truly career building versus a distraction. It is imperative for faculty to develop strategies to address common distractors, such as email, meetings, and requests from others. Identifying tasks that are truly urgent over those that only appear to be urgent may help faculty increase their productivity and efficiency.

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One of the many rewarding aspects of an academic career is the numerous, varied responsibilities that create a stimulating job with a daily schedule that is different from one day to the next. Yet, these stimuli and responsibilities, coming from students, faculty, administrators, professional organizations, colleagues, and external stakeholders, can get overwhelming, especially as many of the requests can feel like they require an immediate response. To prosper as an academic, one must be able to identify the truly urgent issues over those that give an illusion of urgency, or else the short-term requests may interfere with the important time-intensive and productivity-driven tasks that the promotion and tenure process is primarily based upon.

The Eisenhower Matrix is a management philosophy based upon the study of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's management beliefs and style; the matrix helps individuals separate out urgent tasks from important tasks.[1] The Eisenhower Matrix defines important tasks as larger projects related to one's career goals and strategic planning initiatives, while urgent tasks are defined as those that need to be or give the appearance of needing to be addressed right away and are usually completed quickly and easily.[1] The matrix further divides tasks into four distinct categories, beginning with items that are both important and urgent, namely those with high-impact outcomes and short time windows for completion. The second category is important but not urgent items; these are tasks with high-impact

outcomes but long completion windows, such as achieving promotion and tenure, submitting a grant, publishing scholarly work, setting strategic goals, and career development. The third includes urgent but unimportant tasks, with low-impact outcomes and short completion windows. The last category includes unimportant and nonurgent tasks with limited value and no real completion deadline.

Studies of human behavior have demonstrated that people are very good at identifying and completing tasks that are both important and urgent and assigning a low priority to tasks that are both unimportant and nonurgent.[2] However, people are less successful at prioritizing important tasks over those that are urgent or just feel urgent.[2] For example, a protected day may be reserved for an important task like writing a portion of a manuscript; yet when the day arrives, it can be difficult for some to keep that time dedicated to writing when faced with requests for impromptu meetings, a discussion with a colleague, or even an in-box full of emails requiring actions or responses. Likewise, when evaluating a to-do list, it can be tempting to complete the simplest, least important tasks first to build a sense of accomplishment and productivity instead of working on a more time-intensive but ultimately more important task.

Zhu and colleagues found that individuals tend to delay the important tasks that often have higher-impact outcomes and complete the urgent tasks first, despite knowing the outcomes or end results of these tasks are often smaller.[3] They termed this concept the "mere urgency effect," defined as "a tendency to pursue urgency over importance even when normative reasons are controlled for."[3] Examples of these

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normative reasons include that important tasks are often more challenging; not completing urgent tasks may lead to the loss of opportunities; urgent tasks may have a high demand or low supply, which impacts how the individual may assess the task and related outcome; the results of urgent tasks are seen earlier; and the outcomes of important tasks may be unknown (ie, acceptance of a manuscript) and may take time to know the results. Their research concludes that people's tendency to procrastinate on what is important in order to finish what is urgent is not a rational inference but a basic psychological preference.[3]

Interestingly, additional work by Zhu and colleagues demonstrated that having a longer timeline assigned with a project can sabotage the pursuit of a goal, as people believe it is difficult.[4] Therefore the deadline assigned to a task, even artificially, can play an outsized role in completing the task, despite its relative importance.[4] A close deadline has been shown to divert attention to an urgent task and away from a more important but less urgent task, especially for individuals who are busy, pay attention to time, and are schedule driven.[3] Zhu and colleagues additionally hypothesize that task urgency may create discomfort for some individuals because it shifts their attention to a deadline, and completing the task resolves the negative feeling.[3]

To overcome the urgency effect, one should not necessarily focus on a list of everything that needs to get done but prioritize the list so that important items are given the time and energy they will require to accomplish. In his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey redefines the Eisenhower Matrix into what he terms the Time Management Matrix by defining tasks into necessity (urgent and important), effectiveness (important and not urgent), distraction (urgent and not important), and waste (not important and not urgent).[5] When viewed through the paradigm of a choice between effectiveness versus distraction, the illusion of urgency is illuminated and the value of focusing one's time on the important task becomes clearer.[5]

A potential limitation to the "important versus urgency" debate is that it is often framed as an individual debate with individual values, while in reality the academic environment is more complex. Covey describes this as the maturity continuum, where one moves from dependence to independence to interdependence.[5] The choice between effectiveness (importance) and distraction (urgency) is part of one's transition to independence.[5] Yet, the move to the highest level on the continuum, interdependence, requires the acknowledgement that we live in an interdependent work environment, where the ability of one faculty to be effective will depend on others. As a simple example, while an email requesting that a request be approved would be a distraction according to the matrix,

holding off on approval will affect the effectiveness of the requestee, hindering them from moving forward until approval is given. Thus, faculty, especially administrators, need to be cognizant of the impacts that their prioritization may have on others. The importance of building strong working relationships with colleagues and being a good faculty citizen cannot be overlooked.[6] However, one must also set boundaries to ensure they can be productive, delegate tasks when able, and take care of their own needs.

As urgent tasks do need to be dealt with frequently in pharmacy academia, faculty need to develop strategies to handle them in a time frame and manner such that they do not consistently interrupt one's time that is allocated and dedicated to important, career-building tasks. Common distractors, including email, meetings, and requests from students can present an illusion of urgency and be prioritized over tasks that increase effectiveness and productivity. Many strategies for faculty to mitigate the time they spend on email and to optimize the value and frequency of meetings were included in a recent white paper on methods to enhance faculty well-being and productivity.[7] Notably, while the term *meetings* often suggests a large gathering of people run by an administrator, small, impromptu one-on-one discussions with coworkers can also derail progress on a larger task.

Urgent requests from students can be the most challenging to manage. Plenty of student requests fall into the urgent and important category that should be dealt with immediately, but others are less clear, such as requests due to a student's lack of planning or their own personal sense of urgency. As pharmacy programs strive for a student-centered approach to education, it can be difficult to not prioritize student requests above all else. However, instilling professionalism into our students and aiding in their personal and professional development is a vital responsibility of faculty members and acquiescing to unreasonable student requests hinders this goal.

An element that can lead to an illusion of urgency is the addition of emotion. In emotionally charged situations, an individual tends to be upset and wants an immediate response to alleviate discomfort. This often creates a situation that seems more urgent than it truly is. Those instances can benefit from time, which allows emotions to cool and provides for a more measured, thought-out solution and response. Emotional intelligence, including the self-awareness of one's emotions and their impact, can be helpful in these instances to overcome the illusion of urgency.

In conclusion, faculty, like many individuals, have difficulty prioritizing important tasks over those that seem more urgent. Reframing "urgency versus importance" as "distraction versus effectiveness," as Covey suggests, can make it easier to identify the tasks on which a faculty

member should focus in an outcomes-driven environment like academia. Developing strategies to deal with common distractors, such as email, meetings, and requests from students and other faculty members, can be very beneficial. Furthermore, for a faculty member to be their most productive and efficient, it may be vital to successfully identify matters that portray an illusion of urgency and to be able to see through the illusion in order to determine the true nature of a task.

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