LESSON 2

Decisions That Are Important, but Not Urgent

Quick Write

What would you recommend Jennifer do about each of these decisions she is being asked to make?

Learn About

- the Eisenhower Principle
- the difference between importance and urgency in making decisions
- making decisions in groups

JENNIFER IS THE CORPS COMMANDER for a large and active JROTC unit. Today she is facing several decisions—more than she has time to focus on.

Mark is in charge of the upcoming cookout and wants to talk to her about conflicts on his committee. The cadets can't agree on whether they should get paper plates or spend a little more money on plastic plates. He wants Jennifer to tell him what to do.

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Next, the senior instructor has talked to Jennifer about his concern that several first-year students may drop out of the program. She must consider what is causing their dissatisfaction with JROTC and make recommendations about how to address it. She knows that one problem is an after-school transportation issue that makes it hard for many cadets to stay after school.

Then the athletic director for the local college calls—the pregame program for tomorrow night's basketball game has changed and a color guard is needed. Can the JROTC unit supply one?

All the while, Jennifer's laptop and smartphone are pinging away with e-mail and text notifications. She picks up her phone and sees a text from her best friend, who's scored tickets to a concert at the last minute. She wants Jennifer to come with her. It means Jennifer would have to postpone a meeting and leave right after school. She's feeling overwhelmed.

Vocabulary

- moderate
- devil's advocate
- nominal group technique

The Eisenhower Principle

The demand for a manager to make decisions is constant and unrelenting. No matter how large the organization—from a major corporation to a JROTC unit—managers often feel they have too many decisions to make in too little time.

To be effective, managers must prioritize the decisions in front of them to determine: (1) which need immediate attention and which can be dealt with later, and (2) which decisions are important and which are urgent.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower once quoted the president of Northwestern University, "I have two kinds of problems: the urgent and the important. The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent."

This "Eisenhower Principle" can be a useful tool in sorting through the decisions you as a manager must make. The president took the idea further by sorting problems into one of the following four groups:

- urgent and important
- important but not urgent
- urgent but not important
- not urgent and not important

Let's take a brief look at each of these.

FIGURE 4.1

The Eisenhower Principle

Urgent and Important

These are usually the problems you didn't know about ahead of time or those you simply put off till later. Those problems you didn't know about ahead of time include unexpected crises, emergency meetings, and last-minute deadlines. You can't avoid these—so always leave some time in your schedule to deal with problems you didn't expect or plan for. On the other hand, those problems you choose to put off till later can be easily avoided. The key to success here is to take care of your urgent and important problems as soon you encounter them.

An example of an urgent and important decision would be when the last-minute illness of a color guard member leaves you scrambling to find a replacement.

Important but Not Urgent

These are problems you may encounter as you pursue your personal and professional goals. Working through these types of problems is extremely important. You want to spend as much time on these kinds of problems as you can. This is when you plan, do your creative thinking, anticipate problems and take action to prevent them, and build relationships. It's also where you grow, expand your knowledge, and gain new skills.

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Deciding to create a telephone tree so that leaders can easily and quickly contact unit members in an emergency would be an important but not an urgent decision.

Urgent but Not Important

These are problems that distract you and cause you to spend time ineffectively. These problems are important to others, but usually not to you. They include:

- reading unnecessary e-mails, texts, and social-media posts,
- handling unimportant phone calls and coping with needless interruptions,
- reading or listening to reports you don't need, and
- handling other people's minor problems or other distractions.

You should try to spend as little time on these as possible. Learn to say No to people politely but firmly when they ask you to make decisions they should be making or involve yourself in matters you really don't have time for. Delegate when you can.

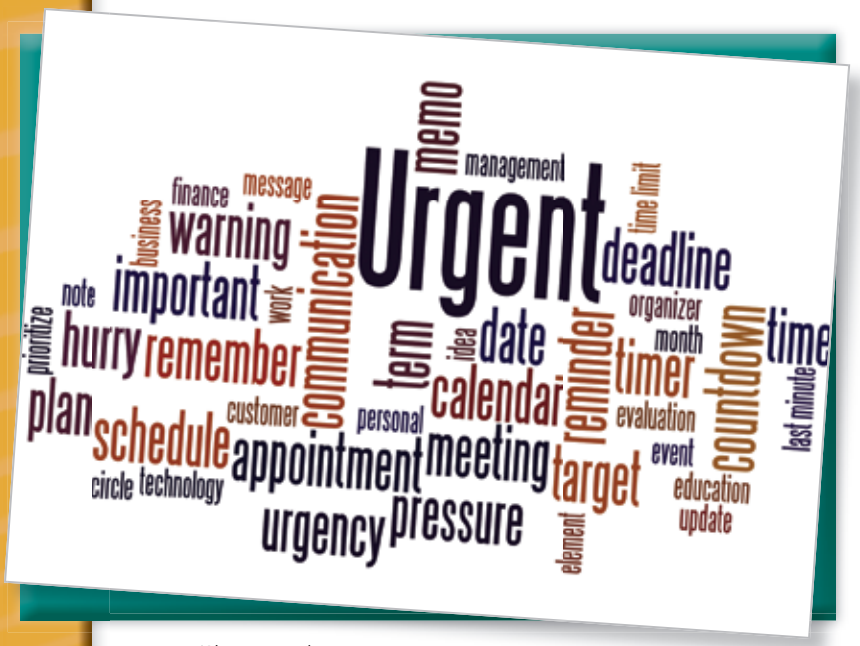
An example of an urgent but not important decision would be the model rocketry leader frequently coming to you to confirm that she is making the right decision.

Not Urgent and Not Important

These problems are the real time-wasters. They might include gossiping with others instead of working, playing video games or surfing the Web during work or study time, and doing work of little importance or necessity. Watching silly TV shows fits in this category, too. You should do all you can to avoid these when you should be doing other things.

The Difference Between Importance and Urgency in Making Decisions

So you want to spend as much time as you can making decisions that are important, and not just urgent. How do you focus on the important when the urgent is always knocking on your mental door? A good place to start is to realize how addicted you can become to urgency.



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Overcoming the Addiction to Urgency

When you're dealing with urgent decision after urgent decision, it can seem like you're accomplishing a lot. You feel important. You might even feel the adrenaline rush from bouncing from crisis to crisis. Remember the immediate gratification bias discussed in Lesson 1? It can cause you to focus on short-term gains without realizing the long-term costs.

In *First Things First*, management guru Steven Covey and his coauthors compared the addiction to urgency with the addictions people develop to overeating, substance abuse, and gambling. The symptoms and effects are very similar—and like other addictions, the addiction to urgency can worsen the problems it's claiming to solve.

It's important to remember that just because something is urgent—or seems urgent—*doesn't mean it's important*. Realizing this is key to overcoming urgency addiction. It helps you to move your focus to the important and away from the merely urgent.

Remember there are problems that are both urgent and important, and you must spend time each day working on these. But if all you're doing is making decisions about urgent problems without scheduling time to deal with important issues, you will soon find yourself overwhelmed by the "urgent but not important." And that's what you want to avoid.

Moving Decisions from Urgent to Important

It's worth repeating: You want to spend as much time as you can on important problems. By doing so, you implement your key values and move forward toward your goals and priorities. Think of making these kinds of decisions as your "quality time."

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The more time you spend on important decisions, the more you can prevent problems from becoming urgent in the first place. The planning and preparation your important decisions involve are powerful, preventive tools. When important problems become urgent, you have less time to deal with them. This creates a worse and more stressful situation for you as a manager. When you devote adequate time to important decisions, both you and your organization benefit.

Consider the telephone tree example given earlier. If you considered this matter and made the decision during your quality time, you were ready for the emergency when it came. If you didn't deal with it, you weren't ready when the emergency hit, and had to spend precious time on the urgent-but-important problem of trying to figure out how to communicate with the other cadets.

Making Decisions in Groups

Of course you don't make every decision by yourself. You'll do a lot of decision making in a team or group. You do this with your fellow cadets now. In a few years, you may be doing it with your coworkers or subordinates at work or in another organization.

Group decision making has its advantages and disadvantages. This section will look at both and discuss how to improve a group's decision-making ability.

The Advantages of Group Decision Making

A group making a decision almost always has more information available to it than an individual. Group members have different experiences and levels of expertise they can bring to the table. In fact, the more diverse the group members' skills and knowledge, the better.

Group members often have different perspectives on the same problem. Members from the accounting department, for example, will see a problem differently than members of the marketing department because it affects their work differently. Members of the legal and human resources departments may know of legal and regulatory issues the group must consider.

A group making a decision almost always has more information available than an individual.

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Groups can also come up with more alternatives than individuals. The ability of groups to bounce ideas off each other also results in more creativity and a wider range of options. In addition, once the group has made a decision together, the group members are more likely to implement it. A decision made by a group often gains more acceptance by others in the organization than one made by an individual. Organization members are more likely to view decisions by individuals as arbitrary.

The Disadvantages of Group Decision Making

At the same time, group decision making has some serious disadvantages.

For one thing, it can be slow. It takes time to get everybody together, review the problem, and consider options. Group discussion can often get off track and waste precious time. Individuals can almost always make decisions faster.

Sometimes differences in the standing of group members hurts decision making. Group members are frequently not equals. They have very different skills, experience, and communication abilities. This can lead to dominant group members controlling the discussion, sometimes skewing decision making. A single dominant group member can often lead to the same result as if he or she made the decision alone.

Another serious problem with group decision making is the pressure within a group to conform. Nobody wants to be the odd person out or be viewed as the person holding up a solution. However, conforming to the group's decision to keep the peace is not necessarily a good thing. In fact, this can cause group members to refrain from creativity or expressing their misgivings about a proposal. A group that emphasizes getting along and positivity above all else is not likely to engage in the kind of thinking that will lead to new ideas and better decisions. The same thing can happen if the group contains members who don't want to be there in the first place. They'll agree to almost anything just to end the meeting.

On the other hand, groups can also have difficulty arriving at consensus. While compromise is important, sometimes groups compromise so much to reach a decision that the result is skewed.

Lastly, it's hard to pin down who's responsible for a group decision. When an individual makes a decision, everyone knows who made it. Group members may share responsibility, but no individual can be held fully responsible. Poor-quality decisions may result.

The group leader's approach can be the difference between successful group decision making and failure.
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Improving Group Decision Making

It's possible to combat the disadvantages of making decisions in a group. It requires a group that works smoothly together, is open to a full discussion, and has a leader who insists on getting everybody's input.

The group leader's approach can be the difference between successful group decision making and failure. The leader should focus on moderating the group's discussion, not dominating it. To moderate is *to preside over in a neutral fashion*. Another name for this role is *facilitating*. The leader works to avoid the disadvantages mentioned earlier. The aim should be to keep the discussion on track and the group focused on its goals.

The goal of group discussion and decision making should not be to avoid all conflict, however. It's hard to get people to think creatively without conflicts arising out of members' different perspectives and personalities. The leader's goal should be to keep the conflict constructive and focused on the ideas, not on personalities.

One way to do this is to insist that everyone who criticizes an idea also contribute a suggestion for improving it. For example, say Caitlin proposes grilling hamburgers and hot dogs at the cookout. Ryan knows there are at least three cadets who are vegetarians. So he suggests that in addition to grilling meat, the group also grill mixed vegetables and mushrooms.

Another technique for encouraging the right kind of criticism is to appoint a devil's advocate. The group leader assigns this person *to constructively criticize ideas that come up in the discussion*. This ensures that the group considers the pros and cons of ideas, and doesn't just go along to get along.

A group leader can use any of several methods to ensure everyone participates. One is simply to make sure to call on every group member. Another is *brainstorming*, which you read about in your LE 200 course. Brainstorming has proven to be an effective way of getting contributions from each member of a group. Everyone throws out ideas and options, and no one is allowed to criticize in the early stages. The leader appoints someone to write down all the alternatives the session generates, often on a whiteboard or sticky notes. These are then collected for consideration and analysis.

Brainstorming and the nominal group technique are both effective ways of getting contributions from each member of a group.

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Another way to improve group decision making and ensure input is called the nominal group technique. This is *a structured variation of a group discussion to reach consensus*. The technique consists of four steps:

1. The moderator reads the question under consideration to the group. Each group member then silently and independently comes up with ideas and writes them down.
2. The group then records all the members' ideas without debate. The moderator asks for an idea from a group member and writes it down on a flip chart or whiteboard. The moderator then asks for an idea from the next member, and so on.
3. The group then discusses each idea. Members consider the logic of the idea and its relative importance. The idea's creator need not defend or explain it—anyone may do so.
4. The group members then rate the ideas privately. Votes are taken to determine which ideas the group as a whole rates most highly. The most highly rated ideas become the group's most favored responses to the question the moderator originally posed.

The nominal group technique is restricted and works well only for a single-topic meeting. It doesn't allow for full discussion or development of ideas. But it has several advantages. It can generate more ideas than a typical group discussion. And it lessens competition and pressure to conform within the group. It encourages group members to propose constructive solutions and allows the group to consider them democratically. It can also give a better sense that the group has arrived at a solution than a traditional group discussion might.

tech TIP

Technology similar to that used in some JROTC classrooms can be useful to group decision making. Each group member sits at a computer terminal or has an electronic device for voting. A moderator poses a question. Members can anonymously submit solutions or comments, rank the idea, or vote on it. Such systems allow for faster collection of ideas and votes than writing them down by hand.

CHECKPOINTS

Lesson 2 Review

Using complete sentences, answer the following questions on a sheet of paper.

1. What kinds of problems are urgent and important?
2. What kinds of problems are important but not urgent?
3. To what did Steven Covey and his coauthors compare the addiction to urgency?
4. How do you prevent important problems from becoming urgent?
5. What are some advantages of group decision making?
6. What are some advantages of the nominal group technique?

APPLYING YOUR LEARNING

7. Make a list of several decisions you must make over the next week. Then rate their urgency and importance as discussed in this lesson. What did you learn?