



UNIT-3

Prioritizing Work and Routines

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- 📌 Use the Eisenhower principle to prioritize work
- 📌 Say no
- 📌 Use routines to simplify your life
- 📌 Understand why you procrastinate and develop methods for tackling tasks
- 📌 Apply ideas and tools to make your household more productive and efficient

Unit 3

Prioritizing work and Routines

Prioritizing Your Tasks

The Urgent-Important Matrix

Origins of the Matrix

Former United States President Dwight Eisenhower once said, “What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important.” He based his time management around this idea. Other personal productivity experts, including Stephen Covey and Laura Stack, have mainstreamed this idea in recent years.

Eisenhower’s matrix is pictured on the next page. It can help us determine what’s urgent, what’s important, and most importantly, how we should be spending our time.

- 📌 **Important** is defined as an activity that will help you complete your goals.
- 📌 **Urgent** is defined as something that has a deadline attached to it.

Matrix Overview



Quadrant 1: Urgent and Important

These are the things that need to get done NOW. This is the payroll deadline, the upset client, and your income tax return. Ignoring these items will result in major disasters.

This is where many people find that their time gets eaten up. “I can’t control when clients get upset!” you might say. “Dealing with an interruption like that always throws my day off kilter.”

You’re certainly right about one thing: these situations often can’t be controlled. However, their frequency and impact can often be reduced with some good Quadrant 2 activities.

Quadrant 2: Important but Not Urgent

These are the big-picture items: the things that may not have a deadline but are crucial to your long-term success. This is where our weekly review, goal setting, and information management fits in. Time spent here is invested in yourself, in others, and in the future. Activities here should diminish the number of Quadrant 1 items, reducing stress, minimizing crises, and making you feel more in control.

Quadrant 3: Urgent but Not Important

These are the time-wasters that can suck the life out of anyone’s day. Unnecessary meetings, drop-in visitors, improperly delegated projects, and pointless reports all fall into this category.

There are a few ways to manage interruptions. We don’t recommend an open-door policy – it’s just too disruptive. But locking yourself in your office like a hermit can result in small problems spiraling out of control. Instead of one of these all-or-nothing approaches, think about using one of these techniques in your office.

Set Office Hours

Set aside specific hours in the day when your door will be open, like professors do. Make exceptions for emergencies.

Institute a Quiet Time Policy

Some organizations have successfully instituted a timeframe where employees cannot interrupt each other or schedule meetings. The best time is typically first thing in the morning or during a period of time when customers are not coming in.

Set up a Signal System

Meet with your department and agree on a signal that will indicate not to interrupt them unless it’s an emergency. Some popular ideas:

- Ñ Wearing an armband or hat
- Ñ Installing curtains across cubicle doors

- Ñ Turning your nameplate around
- Ñ Hanging a sign on the door

This system will only work if employees use it properly and don't abuse it.

Create an Information Center

If people are constantly visiting your office looking for forms, brochures, or other standard information, try hanging a file system outside your office door, clearly labeling each section, and filling it with those items. Be sure to include your contact information in case they have questions.

Quadrant 4: Not Urgent and Not Important

These are the activities that produce the most waste. Lingering over coffee, surfing the Internet for hours, mindless TV watching, and gossiping around the lunch table are all activities that eat up our time but don't have any tangible results. Watch out for these black holes in your day! True recreation should re-energize you, not turn you into a mindless zombie.

Putting Tasks in Their Place

Let's use the urgent-important matrix to help Donald from this morning's exercise. He has made a list of the various tasks that he usually performs in a day, as well as tasks that he will be working on this week. (Today is Monday in Donald's world.) He wants to identify where he should be spending his time so that he doesn't end up in the hole again!

Place the tasks from the handout in the correct quadrant.

	Urgent	Non-Urgent
Important		

Not Important		
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Saying No

In order to make the most of your time, you need to find ways to decline tasks that don't move you towards your goals – those Quadrant 3 tasks that can be time-wasters. However, many people find saying no very stressful.

So just how do you say no in a way that won't make you feel bad? Once you understand the request and decide you want to say no, choose the kind of no that best suits the person and situation. Here are some general rules to follow.

The simplest option is to **say no firmly and calmly**, without saying, "I'm sorry," which weakens your stand. Or, follow "no" with a straightforward explanation of what you are feeling or what you are willing to do. Examples:

- Ñ "I'm uncomfortable doing that."
- Ñ "I'm not willing to tell the customer no, but I will process the refund for you."
- Ñ "I don't want to do that."

You can also **offer a choice or alternative** with your "no," such as:

- Ñ "Not now; however, I will when I get this done, which could be in an hour."
- Ñ "I don't have time today, but I could help out first thing tomorrow morning."

Another option is to say no and **offer a compromise**. This works when you already have a lot on your plate and someone gives you a project that they feel must be completed right now. Here is an example: "I'm about halfway through that staffing report that you asked me to complete by Friday. I can pause my work on that task, and start this new project instead if you like. What would be the new deadline for the staffing project?"

Similar to this is the approach where you **say yes, and then give your reasons for not doing it or your alternative solution**. This approach is very interesting. You may want to use it in situations when you are willing to meet the request, but not at the time or in the way the other person wants it. Examples:

- Ñ “Yes, I would be willing to help you out, but I won’t have time until tomorrow afternoon.”
- Ñ “Yes, I could have part of your report typed, but not all 40 pages.”
- Ñ “Yes, I’d be willing to go along with your second alternative, but not the third one you suggested.”

Just make sure that you are ready to follow through on your promises!

You can also simply **clarify your reasons**. This does not include long-winded statements filled with excuses, justifications, and rationalizations. It’s enough that you do not want to say yes. Your clarification is given to provide the receiver more information so that he or she can better understand your position. If your message isn’t getting through, **try making an empathetic listening statement and then saying no**. Example: “I can see that it is important to you that one of my secretaries gets your report done. I’d like to have someone do it, but my staff is already overburdened with high priority tasks to be completed by the end of the day.”

You may have developed **your own style of saying no** based on your past experience and personality. If so, use it.

Creating Routines

Why Routines?

Routines simplify; clarify; and create order, symmetry, and familiarity in chaos and high stress. Routines are the foundation of success. Be dull in your everyday routine so you can be wildly creative where it counts.

During high stress, routines are like ports in a storm. Top performers in every area of every industry have lives full of ritual. Routines allow you to concentrate on what’s really important. Once you set them, they save you time and energy because you won’t have to plan or think about them.

Routines include setting time with family, for eating, for sleeping, and for exercising. It means setting a clear routine or time for all necessary activities. The way to get routines to work for you is to make sure you are setting them at times that work best for you and your biological clock. Your morning routines should be so good that when you walk out of your house, you feel ready to tackle any problems the world throws at you.

Remember:

- Ñ No activity is more important to ritualize than sleep.
- Ñ By fixing mealtimes and planning in advance you'll become vastly more efficient.
- Ñ Since exercise has such a powerful effect on brain energy and alertness, place your workout at times of day you most need them.

Start of Day Routine

Here is what we suggest for a morning routine when you arrive at the office.

1. Take off your coat, deposit your belongings, and grab a cup of your favorite hot beverage in your favorite mug.
2. Take ten minutes to get your head in the game and catch up on chatter. (Then you won't be wondering how Betty's party went last night, or if Myron made up with his girlfriend.)
3. Sit at your desk. Clear the surface and the priority tray.
4. Review your incubator, tasks, and calendar for the day.
5. Process your voice mail and e-mail.
6. Prioritize your tasks.
7. Place materials for the first task in your priority tray.
8. Get started! You should try to focus on one thing at a time.

Tip: If someone rushes in with something that must be done right away, you can place your current project in the priority box, switch to the emergency task, and then go back to your project right away.

Returning from a Meeting, Lunch, or Other Interruption

When you are called away from your desk, you can use the above ritual to get your head back in the game and start working on the right thing. Simply start at Step 3.

End of Day Routine

The end of day routine looks similar.

1. Process your voice mail and e-mail.
2. Review your calendar tasks, incubator items, and priority tray items.
 - Ñ What did you accomplish?
 - Ñ What didn't get done? Why?
3. Set up your to-do list, calendar, and incubator for tomorrow.
4. Clear the surface of your desk and your priority tray.
5. Leave work.
6. Take the time on the drive home to decompress.
 - Ñ If you remember something that you forgot to log, make a note, leave yourself a voice-mail, or send yourself an e-mail.
 - Ñ If you're having a hard time letting go of a problem or task, picture it inside a balloon. Now, imagine the balloon floating away and outside of your stream of consciousness.

7. Go home and enjoy your evening!

Dealing with E-mail

In general, you should work through your inbox at the beginning and end of your day, and at regular intervals. Try to find natural work breaks to deal with e-mail. Let's say that you're working on a complex proposal. You might take an e-mail break after you've completed each section. This gives your mind a refresher and it prevents interrupting your train of thought.

You may want to set your e-mail program to only check your e-mail once every hour. Some time management experts even suggest dealing with e-mail only once or twice a day.

Stopping Procrastination Now (Not Later!)

Tackling Procrastination

Sometimes it's easier to put things off than it is to tackle them right now, especially if the task is unpleasant. You tell yourself you'll start that diet... in the morning, after this big turkey dinner. You'll tackle that messy storage room next weekend. You'll call that angry client... right after this meeting.

How do you motivate yourself to get started on these kinds of projects? How do you stop making promises and start doing? Here are a few ideas.

Identify the Reward and the Cost

Think about what it will cost you to perform the unpleasant task. Half an hour of your time? Money on new storage items? Some patience? Then, think about the benefits. Regardless of the cost, you'll feel a sense of satisfaction at getting an unpleasant task off your to-do list.

Break it into Parts

How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time...dipped in chocolate. What does this mean? It means splitting big projects into small parts and making them more enjoyable. Perhaps playing lively music will help motivate you to clean. Or, promise yourself some other treat after each small part of the task is complete.

Five Minutes Before the Hour

Set aside five minutes at the end of each hour to work on one small part of the task. At the end of your five minute session, set a timer for 55 minutes so you'll remember the next five-minute period. What can you get done in only five minutes? Try it – you'll be surprised! This example of instant success will bring a feeling of genuine satisfaction. It might just be the motivator that you need to stop procrastinating and start doing.

A Challenge to Change

What is one activity that you are putting off right now?

Why are you putting it off?

What positive things are resulting from putting it off?

What negative things are happening as a result of delaying this task?

What could or will happen if you continue to delay this task?

What steps need to be taken to complete the task?

What will the end result look like?

What is your next step?

What do you need to do to complete this step?

When will you have this step completed by?

Who will help support you?

When will you review your plan?

Applying Our Lessons at Home

Record productivity ideas for each topic listed below.

Meals

Exercise

Fun Stuff

Children

Chores and Housework

General Organization

Further Reading:

- ✓ Gleeson, Kerry. *The Personal Efficiency Program (4th Edition)*. Wiley, 2008.
- ✓ Merson, Len. *The Instant Productivity Toolkit*. Sourcebooks, Inc., 2005.
- ✓ Nevel Thomas, Maura. *Personal Productivity Secrets*. Wiley, 2012.
- ✓ Stack, Laura. *Leave the Office Earlier*. Broadway Books, 2004.
- ✓ —. *What To Do When There's Too Much To Do*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2012.
- ✓ Templar, Richard. *The Rules of Work (2nd Edition)*. Pearson Education, 2009.