

# Where Do You Focus Your Time?

By Neal Gray, Business Coach, *Action International*

Have you ever gotten to the end of the week and wondered, “What happened to my time? I was busy but I don’t feel like I really got anything done.” Many business owners are very busy people but struggle with this issue on an ongoing basis. They spend too much time working “in” their business and not enough time working “on” their business. Why? Usually because working on a sale, spending time on customer service, or checking on production issues is of immediate concern. It’s urgent to get it dealt with right away, and yet it is usually not the best use of the owners’ time.

Steven Covey, in his book *First Things First*, talks about what he calls the Time Management Matrix. It is essential to understand this concept if you want a chance to get a hold of where your time goes and how to get it back under your control. I will describe a different picture of the same concept. This is a picture that as an *Action* coach I find is easier to use to discuss the four quadrants of time management.

Imagine a target, not a business target, but a shooting target used for something like archery or darts. In the center of the target is the bullseye, surrounded by three rings. Take a piece of paper and draw a bullseye circle in the middle of the paper and write the words ‘Important and Non-Urgent’ in the bullseye. These are the things that you should spend the majority of time on and yet because they are not urgent they tend to be put on the back burner. Activities in the bullseye, or the ‘Zone’ as I call it, include planning, budgeting, documenting workflow, learning, building and maintaining relationships (like time with your family or team). You need to plan so that you invest at least 20 percent of your time here.

Draw another ring around the first circle. This is the Demand ring and often you can expect to put as much as 60 percent of your time here. Items here are ‘Important and Urgent’. Sometimes these items are put here by others who drop things on our desk at the last minute and other times we put them here because we didn’t take care of something that started out in the Zone but now is critical. Examples include a last minute deadline set by the customer or discovering that your teenager is in trouble because you didn’t have the time when they were young to spend with them.

Again draw another ring, this time circling the other two. We are now in the Delusion ring and you should spend no more than 10 percent of your time here. These are things that are ‘Urgent but Not Important’. We jump on taking care of these tasks because we perceive them to be Urgent but forget that they are not important. If you are in the middle of a conversation with someone and the phone rings, do you answer it? Who’s more important ... the person you are talking to or the phone call? Before you answer that question, answer this one. When someone interrupts your conversation to answer his or her phone, how does that make you feel? Your e-mail is on-line using Internet access and your computer says, “You’ve Got Mail” every time a new message arrives. Do you answer it immediately? Do you feel important or more effective when you respond promptly, even if it’s actually wasting time that should be spent in the bullseye?

The outer ring (draw it now) is the Distraction Ring and again you should spend no more than 10 percent of your time here. These are all time waster activities that are ‘Not Urgent and Not Important’. Have you ever seen someone play solitaire at work or go to a networking session just to eat and talk with friends. From a business perspective, these are a waste of time. That isn’t to say that there is no value in time wasters now and then, but only when they have a purpose. For example, you get home at the end of a stressful day and decide that you are going to spend an hour just playing computer games as a way to relax and unwind. And yet, if you played the games with your spouse or

your kids then the activity could become a bullseye activity because it may actually be a quality time relationship building activity.

One key to success in managing your time is to recognize which ring any given activity falls in and get in the habit of spending most of your time in the bullseye. To do this you also must learn to delegate the delusion activities and as many of the demand activities to others on your team. Too often business owners spend the majority of their time in the demand and delusion rings thus leaving no time for the bullseye, the Zone.

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