

4: The Urgent-Important Matrix



About this Tool

The ***Urgent-Important Matrix*** is a simple decision-making tool to help you focus on which tasks are most important for you and your team.

How to Use It

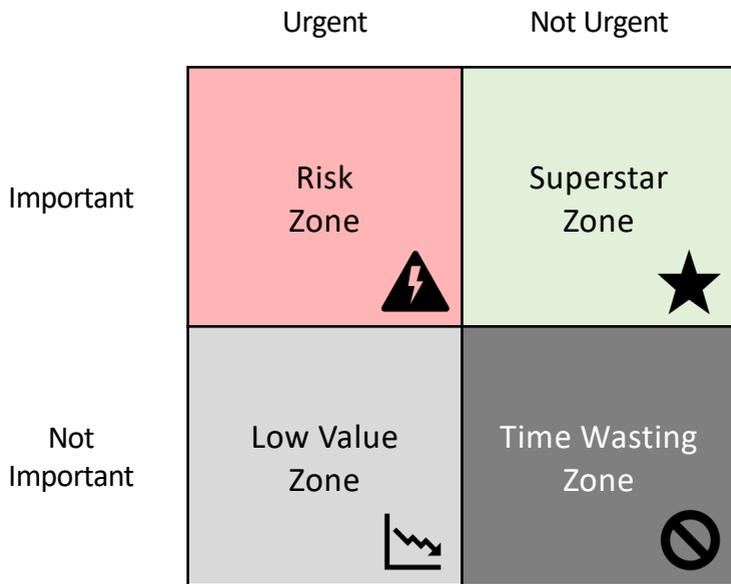
1. Put a copy of the matrix in a prominent place where you can easily access it.
2. When a task arrives on your desk, use the matrix to classify it and take action on the task accordingly.
3. Monitor your tasks to “Manage Your Zones” using the guidelines provided, to stop your workload growing to unsustainable levels.

The Urgent-Important Matrix

The Urgent-Important Matrix is a handy tool developed from the principles of President Dwight Eisenhower, the 34th President of the United States.

"I have two kinds of problems, the urgent and the important. The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent."

- President Eisenhower



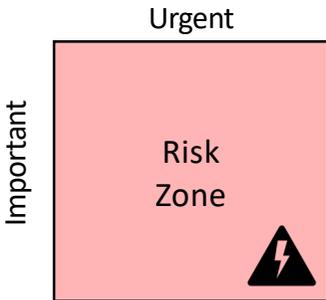
The Urgent-Important Matrix is divided into four zones, using a matrix with the classifications "Urgent" and "Not Urgent".

Urgent tasks must be completed quickly, or else there will be some sort of consequence. Often urgent tasks involve achieving other people's goals, rather than your own (for example, your boss!).

Important tasks are those that help to achieve the goals of yourself, your team or your organisation. They are high-value tasks.

The combination of Urgent and Important creates the four zones, which are the Risk, Superstar, Low-Value and Time Wasting zones. These are outlined on the following page.

The Urgent-Important Matrix: The Zones

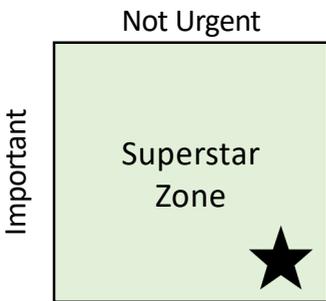


The Risk Zone happens when tasks are both Urgent and Important. It's a risky place to be, because if you fail here, people are likely to be angry that their important task wasn't completed.

On the flip side, if you complete these tasks you may look like a hero who has saved the day. Generally **you want to avoid the Risk Zone**, because tasks in here have a tendency to be rushed – that's where mistakes happen.

However, given that unexpected things happen sometimes, you will find yourself here at some point!

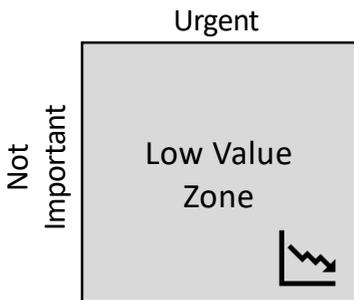
That last-minute proposal or fixing the unexpected system failure are good examples of Risk Zone activities.



The Superstar Zone is where you want to be! Spending time here to complete Important, non-Urgent work is great because you have time to do the job well.

If you can spend most of your time here, you will be a Superstar because your work will be completed on time, and to a high degree of quality.

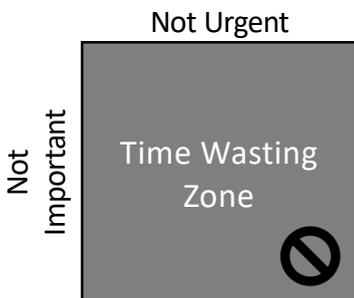
Tasks here include planning and scheduled tasks that you are working on well before they are due.



The Low-Value Zone is for non-urgent, non-important tasks. It's not a good place for leaders to be because **there are other tasks they could be doing that have higher value.**

Low-Value activities include administrative tasks and organising meetings. They do need to be done, but the point is – you don't necessarily need to be the one doing them.

The Low-Value Zone is a good place to delegate tasks to others, instead of completing them yourself, as they often don't require a high level of skill.



The Time Wasting Zone is where productivity goes to die. You don't want to spend your time here!

Examples of time-wasters include cleaning out your email inbox, attending meetings when you're not required, writing reports that nobody reads, checking your social media and gossiping by the coffee machine.

These tasks should be eliminated as much as possible and may require you to push back on some of the people that are asking you to complete them.

Managing Your Zones

To start managing your time effectively, you need to be managing your zones in the Urgent-Important Matrix. Let's look at how to do this.

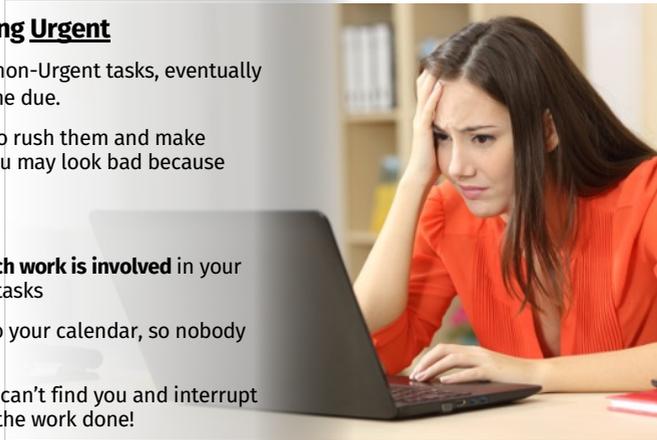
Stop Non-Urgent Tasks Becoming Urgent

If you fail to complete your Important, non-Urgent tasks, eventually they will become Urgent, as they become due.

Once they become Urgent, you'll start to rush them and make mistakes. Even if you get them done, you may look bad because you've done sloppy work.

To stop this happening:

- Make sure you **understand how much work is involved** in your Superstar (Non-Urgent, Important) tasks
- **Schedule time** to work on these into your calendar, so nobody else can take that time
- **Get away from your desk** so people can't find you and interrupt you, giving you more chance to get the work done!



Stop Non-Important Tasks Becoming Important

Even the so-called non-Important tasks need to be completed by somebody.

In the scheme of things, organising a meeting is not very important. But if it never gets done, then eventually there will be consequences because there was a reason for the meeting in the first place!

Don't completely lose sight of your non-Important tasks. See if you can **delegate them to others** in your team before they come back to bite you.



Remember What is Important for YOU

Some leaders fall into ultra-productivity mode where they try to eliminate everything that isn't actual work. For example, they may become more fixated on creating a report than taking 10 minutes to converse with a colleague.

Networking, relationship building and coaching are important for leaders and their teams. Don't let those activities slide, just because you feel like they aren't productive.

While their immediate value may not be clear, make sure you incorporate those activities into your working week, instead of sticking to the "actual work" all the time.

