Three Simple Frameworks for Higher Productivity

by Matt H. Evans, CPA, CMA, CFM

October 22, 2015

Increasingly we live in a world where we have to get a lot done and since no-one can change time, the key is to get more out of the time we have available. The good news is that several frameworks can rapidly increase your productivity. This article will discuss three: 1) Eisenhower Box, 2) Lewin's Equation, and 3) the Zeigarnik Effect.

Certain people seem to get a lot done in an effortless way. One such person was Dwight Eisenhower, 34th President of the United States, serving two terms from 1953 to 1961. Eisenhower followed a simple principle based on what he once said: "What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important."

So each time you have to prioritize, start by asking: **Is this important followed by Is this urgent?** Based on these two questions, you can prioritize all of your tasks into four categories:

1. Urgent and Important – These type tasks require immediate action such as completing your tax return today since it is now due or responding to an emergency situation.
2. Not Urgent and Important – These tasks can be planned and acted on at a later date such as having your car serviced, medical exam, or planning your next project meeting.
3. Urgent and Not Important – These tasks can be delegated to someone else such as arranging a trip, getting your shirts ironed, or answering the doorbell.
4. Not Urgent and Not Important – These task can be eliminated as unnecessary such as having a martini, visiting a museum, or watching TV.

The following matrix illustrates the Eisenhower Box:

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	Putting out the fire Hospital emergency Phone calls from boss	Preparing for seminar Planning for wedding Working on project
Not Important	Answering phone offers Random interruptions Doing the lawn	Watching TV Playing video games Gossiping

"Most of us have problems with time management and many of us, struggling to get our work done, end up worker longer and longer hours. But these problems can be resolved. Time management is not about the time you spend working but about the way you spend your time working." – Effective Time Management by John Carroll

In addition to prioritizing through the Eisenhower Box, you should also recognize how your environment impacts your productivity. This includes the people you work with. Kurt Lewin explained this through the Lewin Equation which simply says that behavior (B) is a function of personality (P) and environment (E):

$$B = f(P, E)$$

For example, if you surround yourself with people who are not motivated, this is going to wear on you and impact your own behavior. Your personality may be positive, but visual feedback impacts productivity. As Seth Godin once said "The best way to change long-term behavior is with short-term feedback." Visual cues that surround you have major implications on your productivity.

A third and final concept to embrace is the Zeigarnik Effect. A Russian psychologist, Bluma Zeigarnik, noticed that people tend to remember things where some interruption occurs as opposed to completing the task from start to finish. A good example is how waiters remember who they are currently serving and once done, they drop it from their memory and move to the next task that is in progress. The key here is to stop at some point that you will remember. These stop points seem to produce better results.

It seems people are more motivated each day by starting on something that is still to be completed; they quickly ramp up and work towards achieving unfinished work. You can also use this concept in your delivery, using teasers to keep people interested for something that will be forth-coming.

This article has touched on three simple methods to improve your productivity: 1) Prioritize your work using the Eisenhower Box, 2) Take into account your environment per the Lewin's Equation, and 3) recognize how your brain remembers per the Zeigarnik Effect.

"The key to building a more productive day/week is to be willing to examine everything, that is, each event or activity that impacts your day and ask, Was this the best use of my time, at this moment? Would this activity have taken less time to complete if it was moved to a different day and/or time slot? The key to getting organized for success is to determine and analyze when you're working on certain activities and your reasoning for these actions. In other words, use clear thought, step back from the trenches of everyday life, and analyze your activities." – Organizing for Success by Kenneth Zeigler