

First Things First

by Stephen R. Covey

I've learned that the good is the enemy of the best when the first things in our lives are subordinated to other things. My daughter, Maria, recently had a new baby. A few days after she delivered, I visited with her, expecting to find her happy. Instead, I found her frustrated. She told me, "I have so many other projects and interests that are important to me. But right now, I have to put everything on hold. I'm spending all my time just meeting the physical needs of this new baby. I can't even find time to be with my other two children and my husband." Seeking to understand, I replied, "So, this new baby is consuming you?" She continued, "I have other work to do. I have some writing projects that need my attention. I have other people in my life." I asked her, "What does your conscience tell you to do? Maybe right now there is only one thing that matters—your baby." She said, "But I have so many other projects and plans." She showed me her organizer. "I schedule time to do these other things, but then I'm constantly interrupted by my baby." I talked to her about the concept of a compass, not a clock. "You're being governed by your internal compass, your conscience, and you're doing something of enormous good. Now is not the time to be controlled by the clock. Throw away your planner for a few weeks. Only one thing is needful. So, relax and enjoy the very nature of this interruption to your life." "But what about life balance and sharpening the saw?" she asked, knowing I teach these principles. "Your life is going to be imbalanced for a time, and it should be. The long run is where you go for balance. For now, don't even try to keep a schedule. Forget your calendar; take care of yourself; don't worry. Just enjoy the baby, and let that infant feel your joy." I reminded her: "The good is often the enemy of the best. You won't get much satisfaction from fulfilling scheduled commitments if you have to sacrifice first things and best things. Your satisfactions are tied to your role expectations. Maybe the only role that matters this entire day will be mothering your new baby. And if you fulfill that role well, you will feel satisfied. But if you schedule other commitments when you have no control of the demands your baby is going to make, you'll only be frustrated." Maria has since learned to relax and enjoy her baby more. She has also involved her husband and other children more in caring for the new baby, sharing with them all that can be shared.

Identify Your First Things

What are the first things in your life? One good way to answer that question is by asking other questions: "What is unique about me? What are my unique gifts? What is it that I can do that no one else can do? For instance, who else can be a father to your child? A grandparent to your grandchildren? Who else can teach your students? Who else can lead your company? Who else can be a mother to your baby? In a sense, we all have our "babies," meaning some demanding new project or product. Each of us has unique talents and capabilities and an important work to do in life. The tragedy is that our unique contribution is often never made because the important "first things" in our lives are choked out by other urgent things. And so some important works are never started or finished. In our new book, *First Things First*, co-authored with Roger and Rebecca Merrill, *we suggest that the path to personal leadership follows the stepping stones of vision, mission, balance, roles, goals, perspective, and integrity in the moment of choice*. It's an ecological balancing process. We invite readers to think very carefully through this process. "What my responsibilities in life? Who are the people I care about?" The answers become the basis for thinking through your roles. Your goals are then set by asking, "What is the important future state for each relationship or responsibility?" Setting up win-win agreements with people and maintaining positive relationships is not an efficient process; in fact, the process is usually slow. But once a win-win agreement is in place, the work will go fast. If you're efficient up front, you might be taking the slowest approach. Yes, you might drum your decision down someone else's throat, but whether or not he is committed to live by that decision and to carry it out is a different matter. Slow is fast; fast is slow. Peter Drucker makes the distinction between a quality decision and an effective decision. You can make a quality decision, but if there isn't commitment to it, it won't be effective. There has to be commitment to make a "quality decision" effective. An executive may be highly efficient working with things, but highly ineffective working with people. Efficiency is different in kind from effectiveness: Effectiveness is a results word; efficiency is a methods word. Some people can climb the "ladder of success" very efficiently, but if it's leaning against the wrong wall, they won't be effective. Efficiency is the value you learn when you work with things. You can move things around fast: you can move money, manage resources, and rearrange your furniture quickly. But if you try to be efficient with people on jugular issues, you'll likely be ineffective. You can't deal with people as if you're dealing with things. You can be efficient with things, but you need to be effective with people, particularly on jugular issues. Have you ever tried to be efficient with your spouse on a tough issue? How did it go? If you go fast, you'll make very slow progress. If you go slow and get deep involvement doing what is necessary through synergistic communication based on a win-win spirit you'll find that in the long run it's fast because then you have total commitment to it. You also

have a quality decision simply because you have the benefit of different creative ideas interacting, creating a new solution that is better and more bonding.

Subordinate Clock to Compass

For many executives, the dominant metaphor of life is still the clock. We value the clock for its speed and efficiency. The clock has its place, efficiency has its place, after effectiveness. The symbol of effectiveness is the compass—a sense of direction, purpose, vision, perspective, and balance. A well-educated conscience serves as an internal monitoring and guidance system. To move from a clock to a compass mindset, you focus on moving the fulcrum over by empowering other people. But the empowerment process itself is not efficient. You can't think control; you think of releasing feelings seldom expressed and interacting with others until you create something better and you don't know what it is at the beginning. It takes a lot of internal security, a lot of self-mastery, before you can even assume that risk. And the people who like to control their time, money, and things, tend to try to control people, taking the efficiency approach, which in the long run is very ineffective. Effectiveness applies to self as much as to other people. You should never be efficient with yourself either. For example, one morning I met with a group in our training program. Someone said, "Creating a personal mission statement is a tough process." And I said, "Well, are you approaching it through an efficiency paradigm or an effectiveness paradigm? If you use the efficiency approach, you may try to bang it out this weekend. But if you use the effectiveness approach, you'll carry on this tortuous internal debate on every aspect of your nature, your memory system, your imagination system, your value system, your old habits, old scripts. You'll keep this dialogue going until you feel at peace." Why do executives find it easy to schedule and keep appointments with others, but hard to keep appointments with themselves? If people can make and keep promises to themselves, they will significantly increase their social integrity. Conversely, if they learn to make and keep promises to others, they will have higher self-discipline. The private victory of keeping appointments with ourselves doesn't just mean that we spend some private time alone it might also mean that we promise ourselves not to overreact, or to apologize in the middle of a mistake. Keeping these promises enormously increases your sense of integrity. For example, I saw my son the other day chewing out his little sister for rearranging his office. He had everything laid out to work on his project, but she thought it was messy and she wanted to help her brother. In the middle of his tirade, he caught himself and said, "I apologize. I'm just taking my frustrations out on you, and I know you meant to do well." He did it right then. He kept an appointment with himself to live by his values even in the heat of the moment. I admired him

enormously. Knowing that people and relationships are more important than schedules and things, we can subordinate a schedule without feeling guilty because we superordinate the conscience, the commitment to a larger vision and set of values. We subordinate the clock approach of efficiency to the compass approach of effectiveness. When using the compass, we subordinate our schedules to people, purposes, and principles. The "mega priorities" of the compass subordinate the "mini priorities" of the clock. When your projects are worthy ones, then your purpose will transcend petty concerns and matters of secondary importance. What Charles Dickens learned from writing *A Christmas Carol* is that a transcendent purpose subordinates the old scripts of scarcity and independence. It may not totally erase them, but at least it subordinates them. Dickens got a strong sense of purpose about writing a story that would bless the lives of families, particularly children, when he reflected on the time when he worked in the factories 12 hours a day, every day of the week, and his father and other members of his family were in debtor's prison for several months. He remembered those times of scarcity and recognized them as scripts. And as he combined the images of the present with the past, he experienced an enormous burst of creative energy that subordinated all of his present problems, his depression, and the possibility of financial ruin, to get out this magnificent story.

Without valuing interdependence and abundance thinking, you won't be able to keep first things first. Some people never understand these realities. They fall back into independence and scarcity thinking. Those perspectives are more a function of scripting than of anything else. But we can change the script.

From Urgency to Importance

When we are guided by an internal compass, a highly educated conscience, we may decide to dedicate an entire morning to one person or to focus on one project and subordinate an earlier schedule we'd set up, unless we have strong commitments to meet with certain individuals, then we work around those. Or we may decide to set aside an afternoon to keep an appointment only with ourselves. During that time, we might sharpen the saw by exercising one or more of the four dimensions of our personality physical, mental, social, and spiritual. We use self-awareness to know what to do and when. I recommend a time management credo that says: "I will not be governed by the efficiency of the clock; I will be governed by my conscience. Because my conscience deals with the totality of my life. And since it is well educated from study and from experience, it will help me make wise decisions." Under the influence of a well-developed conscience, you make decisions on a daily, hourly, and moment-to-moment basis to be governed by

principles. If you are immersed in an extremely productive or creative work, don't let anything interrupt. Can you imagine a surgeon taking a telephone call in the middle of surgery? Most people are buried in urgency. Most production and management jobs call for quick reactions to what is urgent and important. The net effect of a reactionary, urgent lifestyle is stress, burnout, crisis management, and always putting out fires. If you're into daily planning and prioritizing, then by definition you live with urgencies and crises. Important but not urgent activities are easily pushed out by daily planning. When you are guided by an internal compass or set of principles, you begin to see that the idea that I am in control is an arrogant concept. You have to humbly submit yourself to natural laws that ultimately govern anyway. If you internalize those laws and principles, you create a highly educated conscience. And if you are open to it, you will keep first things first.

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