
WHAT'S IMPORTANT | Volume IV, Issue 2 | October 15, 2008

"What's Important" is a universal concern. The phrase resonates with an infinite number of meanings. What's important is both a question and an answer, depending on the situation.

In business, as in life, it is fairly easy to distinguish those things that are urgent. Big deadlines. Audits. A call from the CEO. Recognizing and attending to the urgent at work is expected and supported. Teamwork flourishes. Late hours may be put in. Performance awards may even be offered for the extra effort.

But what about attending to what is important? That can be a little trickier. It's more personal, less immediate, and not always obvious to others. What is important can be easier to ignore, but investing time in what's important pays tremendous dividends.

One of the marks of a strong leader is the ability to gracefully tackle the urgent while never losing sight of what is important.

Brian, a newly hired human resources VP at a medium-sized company, became interested in the individual practices and preferences of other employees. His experience was that by understanding what made his colleagues tick – what was important to them – he could help craft a workplace filled with productive, proactive, satisfied employees. He wanted to foster a positive culture extending both from the top down and from the bottom up.

- Everyday at lunch Beth, the company legal counsel, went for a run. Even amidst crashing deadlines, from noon to 1 p.m. she hit the pavement. Brian asked why. "Health and exercise are important to me," she replied. "This is the one time each day when I get to do something for myself. Plus, running helps me work through solutions in my head and I have more energy to meet the deadlines, expectations, and even confrontations the afternoon might hold."
- Carlos, a loyal and accomplished VP for business development, had a knack for managing high-profile negotiations and meeting very demanding proposal deadlines. Although he was well-compensated and his performance incentives were substantial, Carlos hadn't received a raise in base salary in three years. Brian asked why. Carlos explained that he would rather trade in raises for a comparable amount of additional vacation time to spend with his kids. "I appreciate working for a company that values me enough to pay me in time and not just money."

By paying attention to the motivations of his colleagues, Brian could soon name what was important to him: To recognize and respect what is important to others, and to creatively find opportunities to honor those priorities.

Urgent matters typically scream for attention. They are the squeaky wheel. But what's important, either in the way we treat others, or in the priorities we attend to in our own lives, is quieter. It may gently tap on our consciousness and hope we invite it in. Honoring what's important while addressing what's urgent can turn even hollow wins into meaningful victories.

What's important to you, and to those around you, matters. Investing in what's important makes us more effective at tackling what's urgent, and in directing a life we more deeply value.

Email me at chuck@durakis.com to share your thoughts.

Thanks,

Chuck