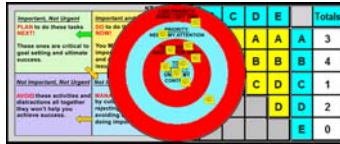


# Covey's Quadrant, Paired Comparisons, And The Priority Bull's-Eye<sup>1</sup>

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“I’m overloaded!” “I’ve got so much on my plate, I don’t know where to start!” “*I have so many things that must be done now, that I feel paralyzed!*”

These are common complaints I hear from people in many organizations, large and small, in both the public and private sectors. In today’s very busy, long-houred, overwhelming work-world, one of the biggest problems people have is prioritizing tasks that need to be done.



How often have you made a neat little “To-Do” list, posted it on the wall, and then not remember to look at it, or not follow it because of too many interruptions, or because some are boring, or because some are just too much work?



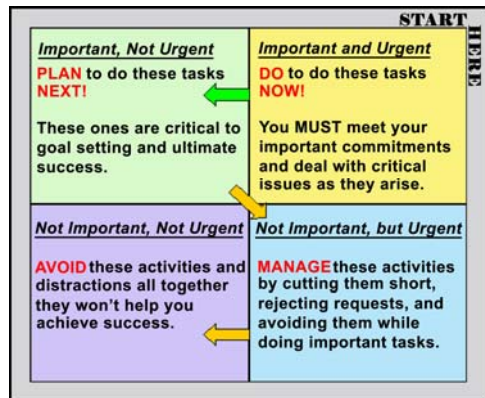
Or, how often have you posted a slew of post-it’s around the monitor of your laptop and then gotten so busy with “urgent matters” that you never got around to them all? (In fact I’ve seen urgent post-it’s on the borders of computer monitors that are several days old!)

In this Timely Tip, I’m going to describe three methods for setting priorities. They can be very helpful to you in either your work life or your personal life. Try one. If it doesn’t work for you, try another.

## 1. Covey’s Four Priority Quadrants

During the 1990’s, Stephen Covey, A. Roger, and Rebecca R. Merrill wrote *First Things First*. In

it, they presented a useful method for prioritizing tasks needing completion. The authors proposed sorting tasks into four quadrants based on their importance and urgency, as shown in the diagram at the left:<sup>2</sup> (1) *Important and Urgent*; (2) *Important, Not Urgent*; (3) *Not Important, but Urgent*; and (4) *Not Important, Not Urgent*. Immediate and maximum attention should be given to the tasks sorted into Quadrant 1 and then, and only then, to tasks in other quadrants.



People use Covey’s quadrants by creating a matrix on the page of a flip chart and then pasting post-it’s for each task into one of the four quadrants. Some mount the flip chart on the wall in front of their desks, while others use a flip chart stand, placed in a prominent place so it can’t be missed when entering the room. It is very important, however, that the flip chart be constantly monitored and frequently updated, no matter where it is posted! Don’t just put it up in a visible place. Pay attention to it every day!



<sup>1</sup> From: [http://www.arniedahlke.com/110415\\_Priority\\_Bullseye.pdf](http://www.arniedahlke.com/110415_Priority_Bullseye.pdf) Please take a moment to check Arnie’s site: <http://www.arniedahlke.com>

<sup>2</sup> Graphic modified from <http://www.achieve-goal-setting-success.com/set-priorities.html>.

## 2. The Paired Comparison Priority Matrix

The paired comparison technique for ranking a list of items by comparing each pair of items, one at a time, has been around for over 150 years. It was developed by psychometrician L. L. Thurstone in 1927 as a measurement method. It has been used in numerous studies as a method for questionnaires, such as personality tests and surveys. It also can be very helpful to people faced with prioritizing a number of tasks that must be completed. This is done by creating a matrix, in which the list of items to be ranked by priority are written as the headings of rows and columns—this enables comparing all possible pairs.

	A	B	C	D	E
A					
B					
C					
D					
E					

The first step in this approach is identifying the tasks needing completion. For example, suppose you were faced with the responsibility of completing the following five tasks: (A) Complete draft proposal for Ben; (B) Finish Final Report; (C) Schedule meetings with Department Heads; (D) Return calls to Joe, Mary, and Victor; and (E) Write a job description for the new position.

	A	B	C	D	E	Totals
Complete draft proposal for Ben.	A					A
Finish Final Report.	B					B
Schedule meetings with Department Heads.	C					C
Return calls to Joe, Mary, and Victor.	D					D
Write a job description for the new position.	E					E

The second step is to record the tasks in the cells of the first row of a matrix like the one displayed at the left.

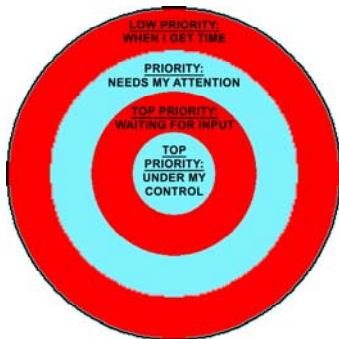
The third step is to look at each possible pair as represented by each yellow cell, determine which item in the pair is most urgent, and then record that letter in the square as shown below.

The fourth step is to count the number of times each letter was chosen and record it in the **Totals** column as displayed at the right.

	A	B	C	D	E	Totals	
Complete draft proposal for Ben.	A	B	A	A	A	A	3
Finish Final Report.	B		B	B	B	B	4
Schedule meetings with Department Heads.	C			C	D	C	1
Return calls to Joe, Mary, and Victor.	D				D	D	2
Write a job description for the new position.	E					E	0

The fifth step is to start completing your tasks with the item yielding the largest total—the highest priority—and then work your way through the ranks.

## 3. The Priority Bull's-eye



A few years ago, I was coaching a group of overworked managers who were having difficulty prioritizing their tasks. I got them to try various approaches, including the two described above, but none of them worked as well as we all desired. I decided I needed something a little more dramatic to catch their attention. So, I created the Priority Bull's-eye, which is simply a bull's-eye with the rings labeled according to how much control someone would have over a task.

I then printed the bulls-eye as a big poster to hang on the wall next to a manager's desk. He or she wrote tasks that needed prioritizing on post-it's and then mounted them in the appropriate ring of the bull's-eye. One manager got even more creative. He hung the post-it's on darts and pinned them to the bull's-eye. Not only were they more attention-getting, but, because the were hanging sidewise from the darts, he had to reach up and turn them to read them—this kept him more focused on the tasks.



The Bull's-eye poster was very successful. It was immediately eye-catching, drawing the attention of anyone entering a manager's office. People frequently asked the manger if it was helping and how much progress he or she was making with the tasks. As a result, managers were continuously reminded to complete the tasks that were posted.

### **PRIORITIZE!**

— USE THE COVEY QUADRANTS, PAIRED COMPARISON, OR THE PRIORITY BULL'S-EYE —  
OR WHATEVER ELSE WORKS FOR YOU!