



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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THE TYRANNY OF THE IMMEDIATE

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I attended a meeting with a group of individuals and we all had the same problem. Everybody sitting around the table was up to their eyeballs in crises. I had gone to this meeting to have a discussion with a person at a higher level of responsibility with a desire to try and understand why we were in a crisis mode all the time.

The person entered the room looking every bit as harried as we were. He sat down at the end of the table, clasped his hands together, and apologized for being late to the meeting because he had just had another crisis. We all exchanged glances around the table realizing we had come to this meeting hoping that our superior would have a solution when, in fact, he was facing the same dilemmas that we shared on a day to day basis. He, too, was overwhelmed by too many priorities and too little time.

How many of us have felt that way on a daily basis? I would strongly suspect that many people have similar ill feelings about the fact that no matter how carefully you plan out your day, somebody manages to drag something in, throw it on your desk, and create an immediate problem. What is a person to do?

The speaker that day labeled this phenomenon the “tyranny of the immediate.” For the remainder of the meeting we didn’t talk so much about the specific priorities, but about the problem of “fighting fires.” (I should mention that of this group, not a single person in the room involved in this discussion was a firefighter but myself - but the metaphor they used to describe the problem was fighting fires!)

Is there a way of dealing with this tyrannical phenomenon? There are at least three suggestions. The first one is you must learn to discriminate very quickly between crises that are legitimately your crises and those that are someone else’s crises. The second technique is that you must learn quickly to evaluate the consequences of your reaction. In other words, what have you got to lose by dealing with the current crisis? The third ability you need to develop is to cut through the superfluous hysteria around most crises and deal only with the essence of the problem.

There is a temptation to want to react to crises as they are brought to your desk because it gives you a sense of importance. A more important question is, is the solution to this problem your responsibility or does it belong to someone else. Employees are good at delegating their problems upward. You do a great disservice to your organizational structure when you allow yourself the luxury of being diverted from your personal responsibilities to solve the problems of your subordinates. Therefore, one of the first questions you should ask yourself is, who is responsible for this?

If the answer is that someone else has the responsibility for the solution, by all means defer



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taking action. There are sets of circumstances in which life is in danger or property is threatened in which you may want to take the reins for a few brief seconds and make sure that the situation is brought back under control, but for crying out loud, don't be bogged down by taking on the task of solving all your subordinate's problems. An inherent danger in taking on your subordinate's crises is that you may face another crisis further down the road. You may find yourself in the position of having to explain to your superior how come you are not meeting specific deadlines or you are not achieving the objectives that have been set for you.

Second question that has to be asked when facing a crisis is what is going to happen if I don't react? Can a situation really get worse? Or, more importantly, is something that you are currently working on going to be allowed to deteriorate because you have been diverted from your daily priorities? Have you ever heard the term, win the battle and lose the war? Whenever a crisis is laid at your doorstep you have to quickly assess as to whether what you are doing is more important than the perceived problem that somehow requires an immediate solution. All too often the crises that are brought to us are far less important than the ones we are working on. This is specifically true as you move higher in the hierarchy. The higher level a person's responsibilities are the more likely they should be devoting their time, efforts, and energies to developing solutions to long range problems. If the consequences of your taking the time out to deal with a minor crisis means you will miss your deadline or fail to be prepared to deal with something of greater significance, then you are foolish to let a petty problem override a significant one.

My last comment has to do with the ambience that seems to surround crises. Seldom do people walk up to your desk and very calmly and casually inform you that something has gone awry. Usually it is preceded by an increase in volume in the dialogue and, in some cases, there is a considerable amount of wailing and whining about how bad things are as opposed to what the problem really is. It takes a little while to develop the skill to do this but whenever anyone brings you a problem one of the first things you have to ask them is, "What is the real problem?"

Frequently individuals who bring problems to you are so mired down in the conflict between personalities and personnel who are suppose to be addressing this issue at subordinate levels. Quite frequently you will hear more about why something is a problem rather than hearing about the problem itself. Individuals who attempt to cast blame on others instead of identifying what needs to be done are wasting your time.

In summary, whenever crises are brought to your desk you have three questions you can ask quickly that may help you overcome the tyranny of the immediate: 1) Whose responsibility is this? 2) What is going to happen if we don't handle it right now? 3) What is it you want of me right now?

Of course, all of this is not to say that all of us don't have crises that must be dealt with. Sometimes the things dumped on our desk do belong to us. Sometimes the things that arrive unannounced take precedent over everything that we are doing and, last but not least, sometimes



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we are the only ones who possess the ultimate solution to resolve a problem. If all of that is true, then obviously an individual who faces that reality must be prepared to make a decision and take action and move on as quickly as possible.

It is also true to state, however, that an individual who finds themselves dealing with crises every single day is probably not too much in control anyway. If a person faces these circumstances every day, every weekend, and month after month, they had best begin to reassess their role in the organizational hierarchy.

Like all other tyrants, the tyranny of the immediate can be overcome by refusing to be intimidated. Tyrants are bullies. Crises are thieves of our own priorities. If we refuse to accept them, we can become even more a master of our own fate.