

[WORKPLACE WELL-BEING: DION KLEIN]

Can I have that yesterday?

Breaking the habit



- Identify the difference between "urgent" and "important"
- Base your "to do" list on important, rather than urgent, matters
- Clarify what is most important to you (e.g., roles, goals)
- Assess true urgency (i.e., is the matter a life-threatening situation?)
- Compare urgent demands with your list of priorities
- Anticipate urgency and visualise alternatives (adapted from Ostrow, 2002)

Urgency addiction

The new corporate disease is not hard to spot — people busily rushing around, chronically overcommitted, hooked on the adrenalin rush and unable to unwind

DO YOU feel as if you waste a lot of time? Are you impatient when waiting in line? Find it hard to relax? Do you feel guilty when you take "time out"? Do you feel you work best under pressure? If you answered "yes" to most of these questions, you could be suffering from urgency addiction.

Widely known author Steven Covey highlighted the "urgency addiction" in his book *First Things First*, and claimed that few people realise how the sense of urgency affects their lives. Many get so used to the adrenalin rush from attending to urgent matters they become dependent on it "for a sense of excitement and energy", just as a gambler needs his betting game.

Covey defines urgency addiction as a "self-destructive behaviour that temporarily fills the void created by unmet needs". Another definition is having the urge to live and do everything in haste. This behaviour can become self-perpetuating and get worse the more we repeat the pattern. True, there are times that deadlines must be met and unexpected matters need to be attended to immediately, but sometimes urgency becomes the "ruler" of our lives without our realising that what we are urgently attending to is not the least bit important.

Some managers get a temporary high from solving urgent matters, sometimes correlating to their own personal sense of importance or security. An example of this is when managers give tasks to fellow employees resulting in redundant paperwork. When importance is lacking, Covey says, "people will be drawn to anything urgent, just to stay in motion." If and when they "stop", the feelings of "false uselessness" may become overwhelming. They may realise that their role is fairly insignificant, which may then lead to insecurity.

If someone asks "How's work?" the usual response is "Busy, mate, really busy." The reply conveys a sense of importance for the individual. Important people are busy people and vice versa. Being busy has become a status symbol.

How many people use their "busyness" as a false sense of their own importance? These same people will most likely use the "busy" excuse for not dealing with the real priorities in their life.

How did we get this way — having this constant feeling of urgency which has thrown many lives out of balance? First, technology has heightened our urgency addiction. For example, how many times has someone rung you in the afternoon to see if you got the e-mail they sent earlier that morning, wondering why you haven't responded? Mobile phones have increased the need ("false need") to ring someone to get an answer immediately about something that is probably not very important. And if we cannot phone, we can SMS them to which they can reply quickly. It has only been over the past 10 years that technology has replaced our sense of patience with an overwhelming sense of urgency.

Society has "culturally sanctioned" this sense of urgency as routine which has filtered into the workplace. What is the culture of urgency in your workplace? Are you in a situation where you are chronically overcommitted and are unable to get all the things done that you intended to do? Are you experiencing information overload and having difficulty learning and retaining new information? Do you feel guilty when you are under-productive?

If you work in an environment that is one of urgency, the organisation may be suffering from "corporate ADD", a term coined by expert Rand Stagen. He says corporate ADD affects both individuals and organisations and is "a condition of involuntary distractibility characterised by an unfocused, urgency-driven, reactive work style". The workplace tends to create this hyperactivity if the culture of the organisation is one of urgency. Many do not even realise they are encouraging this type of environment.

Urgency addiction, as with any addiction, has a negative effect on your overall well-being and quality of life. Though confronting, it is important for employees and employers to identify the unmet needs that the urgency patterns are fulfilling. These unmet needs may include relationships, intimacy with others and self, a sense of purpose, and security.

The body can become physiologically dependent on the adrenalin that comes from the urgency. This constant state of distress, or constant hyperarousal, can take a negative toll on the body over time and lead to heart disease, hypertension and headaches.

Breaking the urgency pattern can be a challenge, but there are strategies you can implement to break the habit. First, become more aware of how you spend your time and determine whether you create the urgent matters (rather than someone else). Plan your "to do" lists based on important, rather than urgent, matters.

Clarify what is most important to you and then write it down and commit to it. Determine if your workplace is discouraging or encouraging work/life balance. Are the demands being placed upon you realistic and urgent?

Employers have a duty to identify those who have tendencies towards urgency addiction as well as to engage in self-reflection in the organisation. Without this, the organisation may crash and burn, similar to a speeding car losing control on a curve.

Dr Dion Klein is director of Healthy Worksites, a company specialising in corporate wellness programs for the public and private sector. drdion@bigpond.com or www.healthyworksites.com

RESOURCES:

- Covey, S., Merrill, A. R., and Merrill, R. R. (1994). *First Things First*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Reeves, A. (2000). *Are you Addicted to Urgency? Time On Your Side*. www.workingworld.com/?id=197—timeonside&archive=1
- Ostrow, E (2002). "It's Urgent!! — The Dangers of Constant Urgency". <http://www.lawyerslifecoach.com/articles/story—7.html>
- Corporate ADD - The Stagen Institute. <http://corporateadd.com>