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## Who Called 9-1-1?

*Bill McCurry*



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Understanding how to differentiate the “important” from the “urgent” and then delegating to decision makers is where we find the stumbling blocks where most of us lose balance.

First, let’s define “urgent.” At work, I’d say to Dad, “We’ve got an urgent problem!” He’d calmly respond, “Who died?” When I said nobody, he’d ask, “Who called 9-1-1?” Finally, I figured out “urgent” was a relative term. How do you determine what’s urgent in your business?

How many interruptions do you get at your garden center compared to when you’re out of town? Certainly, more now thanks to cell phones, but I bet you get fewer interruptions when you’re away from the office. Why? Because your team self-evaluates: “Should I bother the boss when he’s out of town?” That’s their personal determination of what’s urgent. Your challenge is to help

them determine what they should do themselves, contrasted to what really needs your input.

At our store, Dad trained me not to come running with “urgent” crises. Perhaps he was following what’s called “The Eisenhower Principle” for organizing work priorities: “I have two kinds of problems: the urgent and the important. The urgent are not important and the important are never urgent.” President Eisenhower explained it in 1954, giving credit to J. Roscoe Miller, an economist and the president of Northwestern University. Important activities have an outcome leading to achieving our goals. Urgent activities require immediate attention, usually impacting other people’s goals. However, they get more attention because they can’t be ignored.

You should train your team to be confident in their own decisions. Your company will never grow if your team can’t take some of the weight off your shoulders.

I was riding in a car with a client when his phone rang. I only heard his side of the conversation. “Fred, we had the discussion. I’m paying you to be a manager, not to call asking what to do. We won’t have this conversation again. If you can’t make this decision after all our conversations, you’re in the wrong position. Let’s talk next week about the results of whatever you decide.”

Very impactful! I called the following week and bluntly asked, “What happened with Fred?” The answer, “He didn’t make the decision. He let the problem fester. I realized we had to make a change. Fred needed to be in a position without the pressure of decision-making. I’d spent more time talking to Fred than any other employee and his area was always lagging. I tolerated it too long. It was holding back the company and holding me down. I’ll free up several

hours each week by hiring someone who can make daily operational decisions.”

Educating the team to make decisions will take a bit longer at the start. Like anything, the team needs practice. So start the conversation with these questions:

1. If you were unable to find me, what would you do?
2. If you did that, what would happen? (Who would die? Who would call 9-1-1? You can make it easier for people to take risks by identifying the significant downside—and upside.)
3. If it's that urgent and you couldn't find me, why not do what you think best?
4. Has anyone ever been fired for making the best decision they could with the information they had?
5. I'm not going to decide what you should do. Do what you think best and let's review tomorrow what we learned from it.

Granted, you may have a sleepless night or two, but this process will identify the team members who can help propel your company forward. **GP**

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*Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at [wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com](mailto:wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com) or (609) 688-1169.*