Time Management: Covey, Juran, and Lean Six Sigma

By Gabriel Kemeny and Michael Reames

Stephen R. Covey, in his book "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" describes four basic types of time management approaches, and states that these four approaches are the result of an evolutionary process.

"The first wave or generation could be characterized by notes and checklists, an effort to give some semblance of recognition and inclusiveness to the many demands placed on our time and energy.

The second generation could be characterized by calendars and appointment books. This wave reflects an attempt to look ahead, to schedule events and activities in the future.

The third generation reflects the current time-management field. It adds to those preceding generations the important idea of prioritization, of clarifying values, and of comparing the relative worth of activities based on their relationship to those values. In addition, it focuses on setting goals -- specific long-, intermediate-, and short-term targets toward which time and energy would be directed in harmony with values. It also includes the concept of daily planning, of making a specific plan to accomplish those goals and activities determined to be of greatest worth" ("The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People," Habit # 3).

Covey suggests that "while the third generation has made a significant contribution, people have begun to realize that 'efficient' scheduling and control of time are often counterproductive. The efficiency focus creates expectations that clash with opportunities to develop rich relationships, to meet human needs, and to enjoy spontaneous moments on a daily basis." (Habit # 3)

Because of the limitations of this third type of time management approach, many people have begun turning themselves back to adopting the first or second generation techniques. However, there is an emerging fourth generation that, according to Covey, is different in kind, illustrated on the 'Time Management Matrix' (Figure 1). "It recognizes that 'time management' is really a misnomer - the challenge is not to manage time, but to manage ourselves." (Habit # 3)

Figure 1 - Time Management Matrix

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	**ACTIVITIES:** I Crises Pressing Problems Deadline-driven projects Production problems	**ACTIVITIES:** II Prevention Relationship building Recognizing new opportunities Planning Recreation Production capability problems
NOT IMPORTANT	**ACTIVITIES:** III Interruptions, some calls Some mail, some reports Some meetings Popular activities Pressing matters	**ACTIVITIES:** IV Trivia, busy work Some mail Some phone calls Time wasters Pleasant activities

As can be seen, there are two main factors shown in the matrix that define an activity: importance and urgency. Something urgent requires immediate attention. Something important has to do with results. Importance has to do with the mission, the values, and the high priority goals that someone has.

The ability to clearly distinguish one factor from another is a powerful tool for you to better manage your time. Consider all of the activities in which you engage that are neither urgent nor important (Quadrant IV). On the other hand, there are those that are both urgent and important (Quadrant I). What about Quadrant II? Should we dedicate some of our time to activities that are important, but not necessarily urgent? What about those that are urgent, but not important?

Let us now examine Covey's analysis of the types of people that have time management styles that match each of the above quadrants.

If, for example, you tend to concentrate most of your time in Quadrant I type activities, you are a "manager by crisis" personality. "As long as you focus on Quadrant I, it keeps getting bigger and bigger until it dominates you. It's like a pounding surf. A huge problem comes and knocks you down and you're wiped out. You struggle back up only to face another one that knocks you down and slams you to the ground." People who tend to focus on important and urgent matters find little or no time to dedicate themselves to Quadrant II or Quadrant III activities. Usually, they will find some relief by engaging themselves occasionally on Quadrant IV activities.

People who spend much time on Quadrant III activities, are concentrating their efforts on things that are urgent but not important. If you let yourself be interrupted all the time, or if you accept invitations to attend all kinds of meetings, and if you are vulnerable to participate in every so called "popular activity", you are subjecting yourself to projects that become urgent but not important. Usually, you are a follower of priorities established at random and by a third party.

Concentration on Quadrant IV activities usually indicates lack of maturity. "People who spend time almost exclusively in Quadrants III and IV basically lead irresponsible lives. Effective people stay out of these quadrants because, urgent or not, they are not important." These are the non-value-added functions that hinder the growth and competitiveness of many businesses in America today. These are the activities that are not focused on the needs of our internal and external customers.

Going back to Covey: "Quadrant II is the heart of effective personal management. It deals with things that are not urgent, but are important. It deals with things like building relationships, writing personal mission statements, long-range planning, exercising, preventive maintenance, preparation - all those things we know we need to do, but somehow seldom get around doing, because they aren't urgent." To paraphrase Peter Drucker, "Effective people are not problem-minded; they're opportunity minded. They feed opportunities and starve problems. They think preventively. They have genuine Quadrant I crises and emergencies that require their immediate attention, but the number is comparatively small.'" (Habit # 3)

Many of the activities that fall under the Lean Six Sigma umbrella can be classified as Quadrant II type functions. Quality Function Deployment in product or process development is an excellent example of an activity that is important but not urgent: a technique designed to help prevent the incidence of urgent, important problems down the line. Statistical Process Control is a Quadrant II activity that will promote a preventive attitude upstream in the process, instead of the rushed, chaotic, "after the fact" corrective measures that seem to characterize end-of-the-line problem situations. Training on Team Building, Taguchi Methods, and Problem Solving Techniques, are all Quadrant II activities that are very important, that, although not urgent, will have a great impact on reducing the number of future emergencies.

Joseph M. Juran's model for process performance improvement can be expressed in the context of troubleshooting and/or breakthrough:

1. Troubleshooting: to eliminate today's sporadic problems so that we restore the normal state of control, or status quo.

2. Breakthrough: going from today's level of performance to a superior level by eliminating chronic causes of poor performance (or by removing chronic obstacles to better performance).

Figure 2 below illustrates the nature of these two approaches to process improvement.

Figure 2 – Breakthrough (From "Managerial Breakthrough," Joseph Juran)
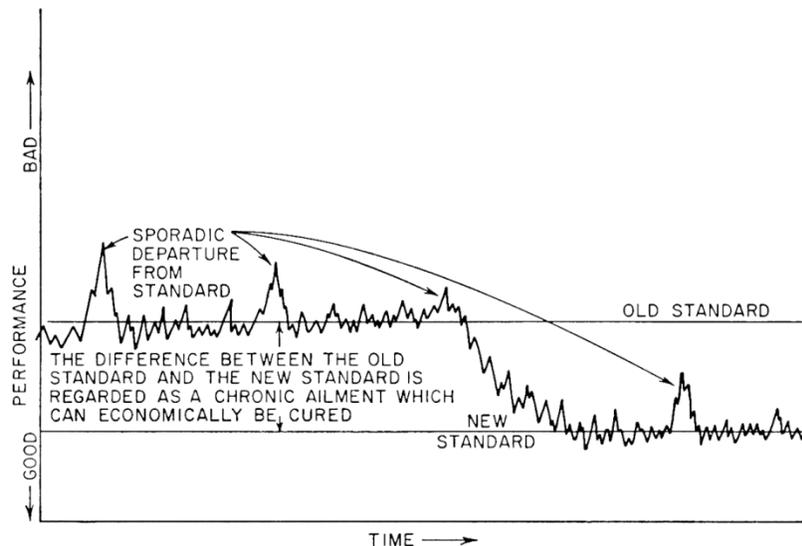
Our average performance, associated with its standard deviation, is affected by "spikes" of bad problems that occur both randomly and/or seasonally. It is our duty and obligation to correct those problems. That is partly what all process improvement practitioners are paid to do.

However, if we spend all of our time and resources to only troubleshoot, we will be doing absolutely nothing more than preserving the status quo.

"Suppose you were to come upon someone in the woods working feverishly to saw down a tree because of the problems it is causing.

'What are you doing?' you ask.

'Can't you see?' comes the impatient reply. 'I'm sawing down this tree.'

'You look exhausted!' you exclaim. 'How long have you been at it?'

'Over five hours,' he returns, 'and I'm beat! This is hard work.'

'Well, why don't you take a break for a few minutes and sharpen that saw?' you inquire. 'I'm sure it would go a lot faster.'

'I don't have time to sharpen the saw,' the man says emphatically. 'I'm too busy sawing!'

(Stephen R. Covey, Habit # 7)

Are we taking time to sharpen the saw? Or, perhaps, replace it with a better saw? Or, perhaps, to see if there are other more effective ways to cut the tree? Or even to challenge the validity of cutting the tree in the first place?

An interesting idea conveyed by Juran's model is that if we find ways to promote a systemic change for the better (a breakthrough), we will achieve a new plateau of improved performance. Obviously, this new average will be also subjected to variation and to "spikes" of problems. However, in many cases, these "spikes" of the future, at their worst, will show a better performance than today's best. This is equivalent to saying that through the attainment of a successful breakthrough we can be better off and have more time available for additional breakthroughs, since the need for "fire-fighting" is diminished.

In which time management quadrant would you classify the activity of troubleshooting? What about breakthrough? It is evident that troubleshooting would fall under Quadrant I or Quadrant III. This activity is usually regarded as urgent. On the other hand, breakthrough, often achieved on a medium- to long-range basis, will be either on Quadrant II or IV. By utilizing the classical problem solving techniques such as Pareto Analysis, Problem Definition and Cause and Effect Diagrams, we should be able to sort out those activities that are not important, thus leaving us with the important (Quadrants I and II) to work with.

Following Stephen R. Covey's reasoning, the ideal time management style would be the one that basically embraces Quadrant II activities (breakthrough), realizing that time needs also to be dedicated to genuine and important Quadrant I (troubleshooting) tasks.

Our daily work produces value-added, as well as several types of non-value-added output. Some of our non-value-added output is necessary, but most of it is unnecessary, such as rework, errors that cause field problems, or just plain time wasters. Lean Six Sigma tools, methods and philosophies can help us maximize our value-added output and minimize the non-value added, considering that it is impossible to totally eliminate it.

The application of the so called fourth generation time management approach can help us find an optimum balance between Quadrant II and Quadrant I type activities that maximize value-added output.