

Prevent a Crisis, Think Like Smokey

By David B. Burns

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A common public service commercial on television when I was young featured Smokey the Bear. Smokey would look right at the viewers and say, “Only you can prevent forest fires.” Smokey was smart. Smokey knew it took less time, energy, and money to prevent a fire than to manage one after it started. He knew how to minimize the chance of a large crisis later by taking small actions early. That’s great advice that easily translates to both your personal and professional worlds.

How much of your time, energy, and money is wasted by neglecting small actions now? A good place to start trimming your waste is with recurring tasks. When you notice you are handling the same task in emergency mode every time it rolls around, it’s time to do something about it.

Typical personal projects handled in emergency mode include annual tax returns, when you race to the post office on April 15, two minutes before closing time. Another is shopping for gifts while wandering around the mall at 5:00 pm on December 24. A third is breaking the speed limit while driving to work because you slept in, after staying up late . . . again.

Work related “emergencies” include annual performance reviews (crammed in the day before the submission deadline), the inventory crisis (as if you didn’t know there were at least 150 thousand item in the warehouse), and reports (weekly, monthly, quarterly, etc.) that keep coming back. The number of these personal and professional emergencies can be reduced by taking three simple steps.

Add a “start date” to your calendar. Most people mark their calendars with due dates for projects, but few mark the start date. Simply estimate how long you expect your project will take (adding 30% for a real-world buffer), then count backward from the deadline. You now have a reminder of a reasonable time to start so you can finish without a costly and stressful emergency.

Add “due dates” for individual tasks. In addition to the start and end dates, be sure to add mini-deadlines for the individual tasks that make up your project. These entries are built in reminders to keep you on track. They also give you regular feedback regarding your progress. These mini-deadlines are also helpful when a boss or client asks you the dreaded question: “How are you coming along

with that project?” Instead of weasel answers like, “making progress,” or “coming along fine,” you now can give an accurate answer, based on documented facts.

Make “appointments” with yourself to do work. Once you’ve entered your mini-deadline dates, block out time to accomplish each task. Schedule your project work just like you would schedule a meeting. Then get to work. Resist the temptation to click “remind me later.” It’s also easier to minimize interruptions if you are scheduled than if your calendar is open.

These three tips won’t create a crisis-free world, but they will help you to think like Smokey and keep your fires from burning out of control.

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