

First Things First

Book Review by Mike Taigman

Do you ever say things like:

“I’d love to spend time with you, but I have to work. There’s this deadline. It’s urgent. Of course you understand.”

“I just don’t have time to exercise. I know it’s important, but there are so many pressing things right now. Maybe when things slow down a little.”

“I have too much to do and not enough time to do it all.”

“A personal life? What’s that?”

If you’re like most EMS leaders, time management is a real challenge. “The county commissioner is on line two, the medical director is on line three, three people have called in sick for day cars this morning, the union is taking the Johnson case to arbitration, and don’t forget your lunch meeting with the CEO of Lady of Great Agony Hospital.” There are so many urgent needs in the average company that it seems like there is never enough time for things like planning, prevention, preparation, reflection, and substantial quality improvement. If you’ve ever said, “I’ve always wanted to be one of those procrastinators, but I don’t have time,” then this book is for you.

Written by Stephen R. Covey (of 7 Habits of Highly Effective People fame) and his associates, Roger and Rebecca Merrill, this book teaches a whole new way to look at time management. It was written in response to the findings from a research project done by the Covey Leadership Center. They evaluated thousands of people who’d completed their 7 Habits of Highly Effective People® course and found that the habit that people had the most difficulty implementing in their lives was, Put First Things First. So they wrote this book and developed a one-day course to help people be more effective in this area.

If you’ve attended any of the time management seminars offered by other groups or if you use a daily planner, there is a good chance that you are wonderful at scheduling the urgent things in your life, and that you get a lot done. There is also a good chance that important things like exercise, sleep, time with family, goal setting, and self education get squeezed out of your schedule. This book and the tools that support it are what is referred to as a “fourth generation” time management system. The underlying principle is that the things that matter most in your life should never take second place to the things that matter the least. Most time management systems have you make a list of the tasks that you need to accomplish and then prioritize your tasks. In *First Things First* you identify the most important and highest payoff areas in your life and place them into your schedule first. They call it, “Scheduling your priorities rather than prioritizing your schedule.”

The authors provide a series of exercises which help you sort the important from the urgent in your life. The chapter on “Urgency Addiction” is particularly relevant to those of us who are or once were EMTs or paramedics. They ask you to answer the following questions:

- What is the one activity that you know if you did superbly well and consistently would have significant positive results in your personal life?
- What is the one activity that you know if you did superbly well and consistently would have significant positive results in your professional work life?
- If you know that these things would make a significant difference, why are you not doing them now?

Next, they provide you with tools that you can use to make time in your life to do those things that really matter, that take care of you for the long term. If you're interested in some tools and perspectives that will help you take control of the time in your life and how you spend it, this book contains lots of answers. Of course those who really need this won't have time to read it. ;-)