

A Minute to Think

Author: juliet-funt

Tags: [#personal-leadership](#) [#work-life-integration](#) [#productivity](#)

Dialogue

We teach what we most need to learn, don't we? This is your story, too.

Think for a minute about that satisfying feeling when we clean out a garage. We're sure to find treasure among the holiday décor, and memorabilia, but one find is far more valuable than the rest—the space itself. Stand before a freshly emptied room (or a freshly emptied hour) and you feel instantly thrilled about all its possibilities. Beautiful, bountiful space sets our energy free and yet is missing for so many.

You use the term “whitespace” in the book. What is whitespace and what's important about it?

What does the science say?

Simplification questions:

Drive --> overdrive:

Is there anything I can let go of?

- What is it that leaders have such a hard time letting go of?
- Personally -- what is it?

Excellence --> perfectionism:

Where is “good enough”, good enough?

- How do you check yourself on this?

Information --> overload:

What do I truly need to know?

- This is so hard -- and I'm part of the problem. What do you find works?

Activity --> frenzy:

What deserves my attention?

- Personal -- we really do want it all.

What have you changed your mind on?

Quotes

Once, in a particularly busy time of life when I was taking on way too much, I burned my inner arm on a curling iron—because, while using it, I reached around it with the other hand to simultaneously put on my mascara. Then, in the same overbooked week, I sprained my ankle and found that the top of my crutches hit right on my little burn, making walking impossible. I was finally forced to cancel everything, retire to the couch, and just stop. To this day, I remember how good it felt to just give up and sit for a while.

Think for a minute about that satisfying feeling when we clean out a garage. We're sure to find treasure among the holiday décor, and memorabilia, but one find is far more valuable than the rest—the space itself. Stand before a freshly emptied room (or a freshly emptied hour) and you feel instantly thrilled about all its possibilities. Beautiful, bountiful space sets our energy free and yet is missing for so many. But open space does not need to be absent forever. I found it myself by accident.

Adam Gazzaley, an award-winning San Francisco–based neuroscientist, helped me understand why the periodic cessation of activity in our workday is so necessary and effective. When we perform complex, intensive tasks without giving our brains time to recuperate, we experience cognitive fatigue. This depletes our brains' limited resources and negatively impacts performance. Studies have shown that the frontal lobe—the part of the brain controlling our highest levels of cognition and executive function—is particularly susceptible to cognitive fatigue. Without the executive functions of the frontal lobe, we can't strategize and execute complex plans proficiently and effectively. As Adam explained, research suggests the only known way to truly recover from cognitive depletion is by giving our brains a break.¹

In a real-world example, a study by Cornell University showed that computer users at a Wall Street firm improved their work accuracy by 13 percent when they were reminded to take rests and short breaks.⁵ Carnegie Mellon researchers found that breaks as short as three to thirty seconds kept workers longer on a concentrated task and improved engagement.⁶ And a partnered study with researchers from South Africa and the Netherlands showed that employees who engaged in "proactive vitality management" (noticing their energy and pausing for internal processing or rest) were more creative than their peers.⁷ We also know that the kind of break you take matters, too. In a study by researchers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and George Mason University, the break habits of nearly a hundred office workers were observed. The study participants kept a diary for ten workdays, recording after lunch how much work pressure they felt, what they did during any work breaks, and how fatigued they felt at the end of the day. The researchers coded the break activities as relaxing (such as daydreaming or stretching), nutrition-based (grabbing a snack), social (chatting with colleagues), or cognitive (reading or checking emails, and social media). Only relaxation and social activities had any benefit. Cognitive activities during work breaks actually made their fatigue worse, likely because these activities tax many

of the same mental processes that we are trying to rebuild.⁸ Across a wide range of fields, from neuroscience to cognitive processing to creativity, research is amassing to show that pausing simply makes us work better.

They are four amazingly nimble questions that can help you pause and artfully direct the application of Drive, Excellence, Information, and Activity. Each simple question points you to the cream, to clearing a path to your most important work. These twenty-five words provide a framework and sharable language I can't wait for you to have. I use them personally just about every week of my life: Is there anything I can let go of? Where is "good enough", good enough? What do I truly need to know? What deserves my attention? Each question maps back to one of the thieves' risks and becomes its remedy: Drive—when it turns into overdrive—needs to hear: Is there anything I can let go of? Excellence—when it turns into perfectionism—needs to hear: Where is "good enough", good enough? Information—when it turns into overload—needs to hear: What do I truly need to know? Activity—when it turns into frenzy—needs to quiet its flailing long enough to hear: What deserves my attention?

As you use the questions to reclaim your time and focus, you'll need to differentiate between two main kinds of reductive haul: tuna or krill. The Atlantic tuna is a ginormous fish. If you were to catch this shimmering apex predator, you'd eat well for a long time. Conversely, you could accumulate your sustenance with a small but mighty protein source like krill. These are teeny-beeny crustaceans with higher levels of antioxidants than fish and so abundant that their biomass on this planet is larger than all of mankind. Most enthusiastic newcomers to the reductive mindset are looking for the tuna. They want to cancel a three-day off-site, pull out of an international market, or drop a multiyear project. They want to be Steve Jobs. They relish the hearty thwap of a big tuna of corporate waste hitting the deck. But I like the krill. It's a better place for most of you to begin. Like when users of white space tell me they've begun to shave five minutes off every meeting. Like when even one field is eliminated from client tracking software so every salesperson on a team saves a half a second, sixty times a day, times a hundred salespeople and uses those found moments instead to sharpen their value proposition. Happy math dances in my head when a client team switches from complex expense reporting to per diem. And krill won't rip out your shoulder as you try to reel it in.