

CREATING YOUR THIRD SPACE: HOW LEADERS MAKE TIME FOR DEEP WORK

Why strategic thinking needs its own place – and how to protect it

"I never have time to think strategically. I'm constantly putting out fires, responding to emails and being there for my team."

If you have said some version of this in the past month, you are not alone. It's the most common frustration I hear from senior leaders.

The typical response is to try harder at time management. Block out calendar time. Set priorities. Say 'no' more often.

But here is what I have noticed: the problem isn't time management. It's that we keep trying to do deep work in spaces designed for other purposes.

Your office/home office is built for collaboration, meetings, and operational decisions. Your home is meant for rest, family, and personal life. Neither space is set up for the strategic, creative thinking that leadership requires.

That's why leaders need a third space.

What is a Third Space?

- A third space is a physical place that is neither your office nor your home, reserved only for deep work.
- It's not complicated:
 - Same time every week (e.g., Thursday mornings, 7-9am)
 - Same place (a café, library, co-working space, walking in a nearby park)
 - One purpose: strategic thinking, planning, creative work
 - No devices (or at least, Do Not Disturb activated)
 - No interruptions (protected time)
- Over time, something interesting happens: the space itself becomes a cue. When you are there, your brain knows what's expected. "I'm here, so I do strategic thinking".
- The environment reinforces the behaviour. Just as your bed signals sleep and your gym signals exercise, your third space signals deep work.

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Why Office and Home Don't Work for Deep Thinking

Your office is designed for the urgent.

- It's where people find you for quick questions. Where meetings happen. Where operational decisions get made. Where your phone rings and your Teams messages pile up.
- Even when you close your door and block your calendar, the associations remain. Your brain knows: "This is where I solve problems, respond to crises, and attend to others' needs".
- Deep work requires a different cognitive state. It's slower, more exploratory, less reactive. Your office isn't wired for that.

Your home (or home office) blurs boundaries.

- During the pandemic, many of us learned this the hard way. Working from home meant work expanded into every corner of our lives. The kitchen table became a meeting room. A bedroom became a home office.
- Even now, if you have a home office, it carries the weight of everything you do there: answering emails, attending virtual meetings, and tackling administrative tasks. It's not a space your brain associates with strategic thinking.
- And if you're trying to think deeply while your family is home, forget it. The guilt of not being present plus the constant low-level awareness of what's happening around you distracts your focus.

The third space solves both problems.

- It is separate from the operational demands of your office. It is separate from the rest/family associations of home. It exists for one purpose: the thinking work that matters but never feels urgent enough to protect.

Seven Ways to Create and Protect Your Third Space

Creating a third space isn't just about finding a café. It's about building a system that protects your capacity for deep work.

1. *Prioritise Your Own Time (And Don't Give It Away)*

This is the hardest part for most leaders. We automatically give our time away to others. Someone wants a meeting... A team member needs help... A last-minute request from a senior stakeholder... Before you know it, your calendar is full of other people's priorities, and your strategic thinking time has evaporated.



Here is what to do instead:

- Block your third space time weeks in advance. Treat it as a recurring, non-negotiable appointment.
- Label it strategically. Don't call it "thinking time" or "planning" – people will assume it's moveable. Call it something that signals importance. One client labels it "CEO Strategy Session", another uses "Board Prep". The point is: make it look unmoveable.
- Enlist help. If you have an EA or anyone who manages your calendar, brief them: "This time is protected. Don't move it unless there's a genuine emergency".
- Set the boundary early. When someone asks for a meeting during your third space time, say: "I'm not available then. How about [alternative time]?" Don't explain. Don't apologise. Just offer an alternative.

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The first few times you do this, it will feel uncomfortable. You will worry about seeming inflexible or unavailable. Do it anyway. After a few weeks, people learn when you are genuinely not available, and they stop asking.

2. *Redefine Accessibility: You Don't Need to Be Available 24/7*

Many leaders equate being a good leader with being constantly available. If someone on your team needs you; you should be there. Right? Not quite...



- Accessibility is what matters, not availability. Accessibility means being there when your team genuinely needs you – when they're stuck, when they need support, when something truly urgent comes up.
- Availability means being online, responsive, and interruptible at all times.
- The difference matters. Constant availability trains your team to rely on you for everything. It prevents them from developing their own problem-solving capability and it ensures you never have protected time for the work only you can do.
- This connects to Secure Base Leadership that I posted on LinkedIn recently. A secure base leader provides both support and challenge. You create safety and you push people to grow.
- Being constantly available provides support but no challenge. Your team never has to stretch because you're always there to solve the problem. Protecting your third space time forces you to coach instead of solve.

3. *Make Your Third Space Consistent*

The power of a third space isn't just about finding a quiet place to work. It's about building a Pavlovian association between that space and deep thinking. This requires consistency. Same time, same place, every week.



Our brains are pattern-seeking. When you repeatedly do strategic thinking in the same location at the same time, your brain learns: "Thursday morning at this café equals planning time". You don't have to fight for focus – the environment cues the behaviour.

Here are some guiding rules:

- Reserve your third space only for deep work. Don't use it for emails, admin tasks, or casual coffee meetings with colleagues. The moment you start mixing purposes, you dilute the association.
- Protect the timing. If Thursday mornings work, stick with Thursday mornings. If you keep moving the time slot around, you never build the habit. Your calendar (and your brain) need predictability.
- One space per purpose. If you need a place for strategic planning and a different place for creative writing, use two different locations. Don't try to make one space serve multiple purposes.
- Think of it like your gym. You don't go there to read emails or have meetings. You go there to exercise. Over time, just walking into the gym puts you in "exercise mode". Your third space works the same.

After a few weeks of consistency, something shifts. You stop needing willpower to focus. The space itself does the work.

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4. *Work With Your Biology*

Not all third spaces are created equal. What works for one person might be terrible for another, because we all think differently. The key is understanding how *your* brain works best, then choosing a space that supports it.



Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Do you think better in ambient noise or complete silence? Some people find café noise helpful as it masks distractions without demanding attention. Others need library-level quiet.
- Do you prefer natural light or softer, cozier lighting? A bright, airy space energises some people. Others think better in warmer, dimmer environments.
- Do you need to move or sit still? Some leaders do their best strategic thinking while walking. Others need to be seated with a notebook.
- What temperature works for you? Some people think best in warm, more intimate spaces. Others need cool, fresh air. This seems trivial, but if you're uncomfortable, you can't do your thinking.
- What time of day is your brain sharpest? Protect your best hours for deep work. If you're a morning person, don't schedule your third space time at 4pm when you're already mentally exhausted. If you think best in the afternoon, don't force yourself into an early slot just because it's available.

The goal is to notice the conditions under which you've done your best thinking in the past, then replicate them deliberately in your third space.

5. *Activate Do Not Disturb on Everything*

This is non-negotiable. When you are in your third space, you are unreachable. Not mostly unreachable – actually unreachable.



Here is how to do this:

- Turn on Do Not Disturb on your phone, laptop, and any other devices.
- Close email, Slack, Teams, and anything else that might ping you.
- Set your phone to allow urgent calls from a short list of people (your EA, a family member, your direct manager). Everyone else gets voicemail.
- The first time you do this, you will feel anxious. "What if something urgent comes up? What if someone needs me?" but the truth is that very few things are genuinely urgent. Most "urgent" requests are simply someone else's poor planning or a problem that can wait an hour or two.
- And if something truly urgent happens? The people on your allowed list can reach you.

6. *Advertise What You Are Doing*

One of the biggest obstacles to protecting deep work time is other people's expectations. If your team, peers, or manager expect you to be available all the time, they will be frustrated when you are not. That frustration creates pressure on you to give up your third space time.



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- Tell people in advance what you are doing, and why, so that they don't panic or get angry when you don't respond immediately.
- Most people respond well to this. They respect the boundary because you have named it clearly and explained why it matters. If someone doesn't respect it? That is data that tells you something about their expectations and your relationship that is worth addressing.

7. *Notice How You Feel When You're Done*

This is the secret to making third space time stick: pay attention to how you feel afterwards. Before you dive back into emails and meetings.



Pause for a moment and reflect – are you:

- Feeling productive?
- Satisfied with what you accomplished?
- Clearer about your priorities?
- Energised rather than drained?

If the answer is yes, your brain registers: “This was valuable. I want to do this again”. That positive reinforcement is what builds the habit. After a few weeks of consistently positive experiences, your third space time becomes something you protect fiercely because you know how good it feels to have done it.

If the answer is no – if you're feeling frustrated, unproductive, or drained – adjust something. Maybe the space isn't right. Maybe the timing doesn't work. Maybe you need to silence more distractions. Experiment until you find the conditions that work for you.

Mindset Shifts Make This Easier

Creating a third space isn't just about logistics. It's about letting go of beliefs that keep you trapped on the hamster wheel.

Let Go of the To-Do List Myth

- You will never get to the bottom of your to-do list. Never.
- It will still be there tomorrow morning, whether you spend an extra hour on it tonight or not.
- This is strangely liberating once you accept it. If the list is never-ending anyway, you might as well spend your time on work that really matters – the strategic thinking that moves your organisation forward.

Put On Your Own Oxygen Mask

- The best way to help your team is to take care of yourself first.
- When you're constantly reactive, operating in firefighting mode, and never making time for strategic thinking, you become a bottleneck. You are less effective, less clear, and less able to support your team.
- Protecting time for deep work isn't selfish. It's strategic. It's how you ensure you're doing the work only you can do – setting direction, making complex decisions, thinking several moves ahead – instead of spending all your time solving problems your team could handle themselves.

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Coach Instead of Solve

- When you protect your third space time, something interesting happens: you can't be the go-to problem solver for your team.
- At first, this feels uncomfortable. What if they need you and you're not there?
- But here is what actually happens: your team starts solving more problems themselves. They develop capability, they become more confident, and you create capacity for the strategic work you've been putting off for months.
- Protecting deep work time forces you to coach instead of solve. "What options have you considered? What would you recommend?" "Let's touch base when I am next available to discuss what you have considered".
- This benefits everyone. Your team grows. You focus on higher-value work. The organisation becomes less dependent on you as a single point of failure.

What Do Third Spaces Look Like?

Below are some real examples:

- **Michael, CEO:**
Thursday mornings, 7-9am, Michael sits in the same corner booth at a café near his office. He orders coffee, turns his phone to aeroplane mode, and thinks. He uses this time for strategic thinking and working through complex problems. He's been doing it for three years. "It's the only time I actually think instead of react", he says.
- **Chris, Head of Finance:**
Chris has a desk at a co-working space she only uses on Wednesdays. She goes there for financial modelling, scenario planning, and anything requiring deep concentration. She doesn't take meetings there. She doesn't answer emails there. It's purely for analytical work. "My office is for people", she explains. "This space is for deep work".
- **Priya, Director of HR:**
Priya does her best thinking while walking. Every Friday morning, she walks the same route through a nearby park, using voice notes to capture her ideas. She blocks 8-10am on her calendar and labels it "Strategic Planning". Her EA knows not to schedule anything during this time. Priya says the movement helps her think more clearly than sitting ever could.
- **Alex, Head of Operations:**
Every Tuesday afternoon, 2-4pm, Alex works at his local library. He uses it exclusively for quarterly planning and thinking through operational improvements. No laptop – just a notebook. His team knows he's unreachable during that time. After six months, he says it's the most valuable two hours of his week.

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Getting Started: Your First Third Space Experiment

You don't need to commit to this forever. Start with an experiment – this week!

- Choose a time. Block 90 minutes on your calendar somewhere in the next seven days. Pick a time when your brain is sharpest.
- Choose a place. It doesn't have to be perfect. Just pick somewhere that's not your office and not your home. A café, library, park – anywhere you can be uninterrupted.
- Choose a focus. What's one piece of strategic work you've been putting off? What needs thinking time that you never seem to have?
- Protect it. Turn on Do Not Disturb. Tell one person what you're doing. Go.
- Notice how you feel when you're done. Was it valuable? Would you do it again?
- If the answer is yes, do it again next week. Same time, same place if possible.
- After three weeks, you will have data about whether this is working. Do you feel more effective? Is the strategic work actually getting done?
- If yes, keep going. Protect it. Make it part of your rhythm.
- If not, adjust something. Different time? Different place? Different type of work?
- The goal isn't perfection. It is finding a system that gives you back the capacity for the thinking work that only you can do.

The Bottom Line

You already know that strategic thinking matters. You already know you should be making time for it. The problem isn't knowledge. It's execution.

Creating a third space – a physical place reserved for deep work, protected from the urgent demands that fill the rest of your week – is one of the most practical ways to close that gap. It's not about working more hours. It's about working more deliberately. Your office/home office is for collaboration. Your home is for rest. Your third space is for the thinking that moves everything else forward.

Where could yours be?

About the Author

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