

CREATING CAPACITY AND THE POWER OF REFLECTION

INTRODUCTION

In our super-fast, super-connected, ever-changing world, it is very easy to not put aside time and space for reflection or even just 'thinking', yet I would suggest that doing so is an essential survival practice, not a nice to have. When we are all head down 'doing', we are like hamsters on wheels, all frantically peddling, and no one has enough headspace to notice that we are all about to peddle off a cliff together or that you (or someone around you) is approaching

SOME THOUGHTS TO GET STARTED

Mindset

- When do you take time out (during your work week) to lift your head from the emails, the urgent things that need to be attended to, to work on the more medium-term issues or the future strategy and direction of the business (area) that you lead or how you would like to lead differently or to develop a skill critical for your own development? If you are like most executives I work with, the answer is likely to be, "I don't", or "I try but I don't manage to consistently", or "I try but then I give it up for other things, e.g. when my boss or my team needs something" or "it tends to be something I do in the evening or at the weekend".
- "I don't have time" or "other things get in the way" is the single most common reason I hear as to why we don't take the time for ourselves and/or we schedule it and then let something else take over that spot. Not having time is an excuse – we make time for things we consider important – the Chairman or the CEO who calls us into an unscheduled meeting, the call that asks if we can take a loved one to hospital. We move things around to make sure that we can be there. Yet we don't privilege our own time in the same way, and this has serious ramifications.
- Taking care of ourselves is like the oxygen mask analogy. If we don't put on our own oxygen mask, we can't help others in our teams, our families, and friends. We can be of more help to others if we are grounded and clear-headed.
- So, the first step is to give ourselves permission to step away to think, and to do so during working hours. Start small, maybe just 90 minutes a week. Notice the impact on your productivity and how you feel and use that momentum to increase the times you spend on 'the bigger stuff'.
- If you are the sort of person who puts the needs of others before yourself, try thinking about the fact that setting time aside for you is not only helpful, you actually owe it to your teams and your organisations (not to mention your friends and family) to do just that.

Location

- To be able to think clearly, we should preferably be in a quiet and peaceful environment. This means solitude, though not necessarily being totally alone in a physical sense, but rather a place where we won't be disturbed by the people and things around us.
- The 'third space' is a term coined by Sydney-based researcher, Dr Adam Fraser (<https://dradamfraser.com>) and he focuses on harnessing what he calls micro transitions from one space to the next (e.g., one meeting to the next, office to home etc.).
- I like to think of the third space as a specific time (ideally each week) during which I think – I don't do emails, I just take a sheet of paper and think about 'the big stuff'. I have found that the space in which I

do this helps reinforce the purpose for being there, i.e., "it is Friday afternoon, and I am in my local café/sitting in the park/going for a walk etc. ... it must be my thinking time".

Duration

- We need to take enough time to get into the flow of thinking, but not so much that we will never do it. I suggest starting with 90 minutes once a week. There is not much in this world that can't be put aside for 90 minutes (and you have your phone for the genuine emergencies). Given that the reality is that we never get to the end of our to do lists, waiting until we "have some clear air" is a fantasy, so let's just do it now.

Developing the habit

- We need time and support to embed new habits. Setting aside a regular time, having your EA help enforce that time as your own, showing it as private on your calendar to discourage people from booking over it, leaving your workplace and going to the same place each time, turning off emails, working with pen and paper versus on your laptop, all help reinforce the habit you want to develop.

ONCE WE ARE SETTLED IN OUR REFLECTION SPACE

Agenda

- Once we are settled, we need to start by taking a few minutes and jotting down what it is that we want to ponder. Our aim is to do only one thing – "doing less is better".
- What's your intention for this topic for this time?

How?

- Don't under-estimate the power of hope... we might ask ourselves, "imagine I could [solve the problem, come up with a new idea etc.] how would I feel?"
- This calling up of a positive emotional state takes us out of a quite closed-down problem-solving mode and flips our brains into a much more creative and cognitively superior space, giving us a better chance of that 'light bulb moment' or that 'moment of clarity'.
- Now, you can start thinking about how you might get to your desired end state.

Know when to stop

- There is a delicate balance between self-reflection and rumination or overthinking.
- When we allow a thought to cycle through our minds again and again with no apparent way to resolve it, we lose all the benefits of inward reflection and can end up harming our mental well-being, so it is key to set a limit on how long we sit in quiet contemplation.
- You can either opt for a specific amount of time, or you may simply say that it is time to stop when you get stuck on a particular train of thought.
- Then when the time has come to stop, the best thing to do is to physically leave your third space and try to immerse yourself and our focus on something other than the things on which you were reflecting.

Keep a notebook or journal

- Sometimes making notes of our thoughts as we are reflecting is useful.
- Writing in a journal is a popular way to do this as it keeps everything in one place and allows us to look back on what we have thought previously, to keep us on the right path; this is especially helpful if we are reflecting on how to change an aspect of our behaviour. It can also help us avoid rumination.

BENEFITS

Improved relationships

- Reflecting on how we treat others and the thoughts we may have about them, can help us make changes that lead to more harmonious relationships.
- Self-reflection gives us the chance to see how we truly feel about the other person and consider the value that the relationship brings, and it can make us more appreciative of that person, which in turn influences how we interact with them.

Greater clarity of thought

- Introspection provides an opportunity to think about something in isolation from the thing itself.
- Instead of our mind being clouded by the emotions we experience when interacting with the thing in question, we can view it in a more rational and objective sense.
- We can see it with more clarity and think about it from a rounded perspective with pros, cons, and other important details that help us make a reasoned conclusion about how we wish to change with regards to it (or if we don't want to change at all).

Connecting to your values

- It is hard to really know ourselves until we have spent time thinking about what really matters to us.
- When we reflect upon ourselves, we might see things that we think go against who we really wish to be. We can consider the important issues that we face in life and form a solid position on them.
- Sometimes, until we really sit and think about something, we cannot decide where we stand on it.

Improved decision-making

- We make hundreds of choices every day. Most are insignificant and can be left to our unconscious mind or are based on reaction or instinct, but when it comes to the more important decisions at work and in life, a little reflection is invaluable.
- It comes back to having clarity of thought, and a focus on goals and action, which can enable better decision making and more peace of mind about the decisions we do make.
- This means fewer regrets or missed opportunities and more peace of mind knowing that we have made a considered decision.

Better sleep

- When you spend a little time each day looking back upon events and how you responded to them, it can bring closure to any unresolved feelings, which can help us not only fall asleep quicker, but have a more restful sleep.

Less stress and anxiety

- One of the key outcomes of self-reflection and knowing ourselves more intimately is that we become more confident in ourselves and our actions.
- We find more certainty in this uncertain world because we are grounded in our sense of self.

With greater certainty comes less stress and anxiety; we worry less about the 'what ifs' and focus more on the things we can do to best align our actions with our guiding principles, and finally we worry less about what other people might think about us and our choices, because we know that we are doing what's right for us.

If you have any questions or would like to learn more, do not hesitate to contact me, Liane Kemp at LKemp@kempstreetpartners.com.au