

Where's Your "Thinking Time"?

November 2010 Newsletter

Key Takeaways

- ✦ Scheduled time for thinking and reflecting is essential. You won't get it otherwise.
- ✦ Email causes you to become reactive rather than proactive.
- ✦ Don't be lulled into the security of immediate action. Action without thought inevitably leads to waste.

I'm continually struck by the relentless, frenzied pace that people maintain at work. Whether it's an engineer at a high-tech startup in which speed is part of the company's DNA, or an attorney at a law firm who insists she has to respond immediately (if not sooner) to a client's call, or the head of a non-profit focused on building community support for the organization's mission, everyone is obsessed with speed and responsiveness.

But does a myopic focus on one aspect of performance really lead to the best results? Are we sacrificing quality on the altar of speed?

A NYTimes *Corner Office* [interview](#) was striking for the assertion — once again — that there's nothing more important than taking time away to (gasp!) actually think. John Donahoe, CEO of eBay, says

I take days away. This is the only phone call I'm taking today, because it's a thinking day. It's a day to just get away and step back and reflect. And I find that very hard to do in the office or in a familiar environment. I find that if I don't schedule a little bit of structured time away, where there's no interruption, that it's very hard to get the kind of thinking time and reflection time that I think is so important.

He goes on to explain that even though he takes one of these days every two months, he thinks he should take more of them — at least one per month. As it is, he uses long flights where there's no email or cellphone service to give himself some pure, uninterrupted thinking time.

Donahoe also maintains that email can be a real problem. He points out that

On the one hand the BlackBerry's a productivity tool. On the other hand, it can be a very fragmenting thing. If I'm spending all day checking my BlackBerry, by definition I'm reactive. And so I try to only do e-mail first thing in the morning or in the evening, because I find if I check e-mail during the day, I go from being proactive about what I want to get accomplished that day to being reactive, and that's a bit of a trap. Being reactive is a lot easier than being proactive, and e-mail and the BlackBerry are natural tools to facilitate that.

I think that Donahoe has really nailed it here: email leads us to become reactive, rather than proactive. If all you're doing is responding to new, incoming messages, by definition you're putting out yesterday's fires. And further, you're implicitly placing greater importance on the newest thing (by giving it attention) rather than what you're currently doing — which is patently ludicrous.

Some people think that it's all well and good for a CEO to unplug himself — when you're the big cheese, you make the rules — that's just not possible for the folks in the trenches. But I think that's a lie. Unless you're in a sadly dysfunctional organization (and if you are, feel free to stop reading now and go to ESPN.com for the latest baseball scores), you're being paid to create value for customers (internal or external). You're not being paid to respond to every random thought or idle question in 8 nanoseconds. And to create value, sometimes you have to actually stop and think.

Action without thought leads inevitably to waste. It's very hard to actually stop doing and start thinking, but that's the real way to eliminate waste and create value. There's a recent [story](#) about a computer room at Toyota's Torrance headquarters that was getting too warm. Most people would get that email and immediately turn up the air conditioner. You know, respond immediately to the email. But these guys did a root cause analysis and found that the real problem was a blocked air duct. The symptoms didn't go away immediately, but the real problem was actually solved. It just required some time to think.

Here's the challenge for you: build some of this thinking time into your week or month. Make it part of your standard work. It's easy to be lulled into the safety of immediate action. But thinking is critical to ensuring that the action you take is actually of value. Donahoe knows that. Toyota knows that. You should know it too.