



## Carve Out Time to Think

*If you don't plan time deliberately, it probably won't happen at all*

Tim Stevenson

**ARE YOU IN** control of your job, or are you in a purely **reactive** mode most of the time?

The only way I know to be sure you are working according to the **highest and best use** of your knowledge, skills, and energies is to be sure you have **thinking time** on your schedule.

"I'm too busy *working!*" people reply. "Who has time to think?" (Notice: They don't see thinking *as* work).

As a coach of many executives and key contributors, I have routinely found that their jobs are *out of control*. They are **inefficient** in managing their workflows and **ineffective** in where they direct their efforts.

Leading and managing are not the same thing, but they both begin at the same place, with the question: **What do you want?** You can't lead or manage effectively unless you can

*"The best leaders I've studied all discipline themselves to take time out of their working lives to think."*

— **Marcus Buckingham**

give a clear, unequivocal answer. And that answer only comes to those who take the time to discover it. **Time to think.**

### Recognizing the need

When Benno Schmidt, Jr. took on the presidency of Yale in 1986, he expressed that one of his major concerns about his new role would be excessive busyness. In a *Wall Street*



Tim Stevenson • Certified Executive Coach  
E-mail: [csc.tstevenson@yahoo.com](mailto:csc.tstevenson@yahoo.com) • Phone: (469) 585-3982

[www.StevensonCoaching.com](http://www.StevensonCoaching.com)

Twitter: @StevensonCoach

Executive Coaching • Leadership Development

*Journal* article he was quoted as saying, **“If I can’t put my feet on the desk and look out the window and think without an agenda, I may be managing Yale, but I won’t be leading it.”**

Frankly, I don’t believe Schmidt would be *managing* Yale either — as least not *well* — but I get his point. He might be able to keep the organization’s machinery going on a status quo level, but he would not be providing leadership, creativity, and progress without time to think.

***“If I can’t put my feet on the desk and look out the window and think without an agenda, I may be managing Yale, but I won’t be leading it.”***

**— Benno Schmidt, Jr.**

I’m amused imagining the reaction of a typical person who, walking down the halls of their office, sees a colleague leaning back in his chair with his hands folded behind his head and his feet on the desk. What would the average person *think* he was doing? *Loafing*, of course! That executive might actually be burning brain cells furiously trying to solve an important problem or creating a brilliant new business idea, but appearances would be interpreted negatively. It doesn’t *look* like work!

Schmidt’s phrase, “think without an agenda,” reminds me of something my friend and mentor Dr. Henry Brandt said. He told me, **“I schedule time every week to sit and stare.”** He called this his “dreaming time.”

I’ve written about Doc before, one of the most remarkable persons I’ve known. Until his death a few years ago at 92, he had been a

practicing psychologist, author of more than 20 books, a businessman who founded and managed half a dozen ventures, and a world traveler and speaker — much of this simultaneously — and never seemed in a hurry.

Garry Wills has written,

**A very original man must shape his life, make a schedule that allows him to reflect, and study, and create.**

If anybody fits the description of a “very original man,” it was Henry Brandt.

### **Carving out the time**

My times for thinking and creativity never seem to “volunteer”; they have to be “drafted.” Doc understood this. He would take his calendar, select a time (sometimes an entire day), and write on it “NOTHING.”

Constantly in demand, Doc received more invitations to speak than he could ever accept. A phone call often went like this:

“Doctor Brandt, what are you doing on April 12<sup>th</sup>?”

Doc refers to his calendar. “Nothing.”

“Then you’ll come and speak for our conference?”

“No. I’m doing ‘Nothing’ that day.”

As he said to me, “You’ve got to *schedule* ‘Nothing’ if you intend to *do* nothing.”

Did he really do *nothing*? Of course not. It’s simply a humorous way of saying he needed thinking time to lead his ventures. Doc took his “dreaming time” very seriously. **“It’s in those hours,”** he said, **“that I get my best ideas for my businesses. Or figure out how to solve a problem. Or decide what I need to do with one of my managers. I can’t get work done through other people without time to think.”**

Marcus Buckingham has written,

**The best leaders I've studied all discipline themselves to take time out of their working lives to think. They all muse. They all reflect. They all seem to realize that this thinking time is incredibly valuable time ...**

He goes on to explain the benefits:

**... it forces them to process all that has happened, to sift through the clutter, to run ideas up the proverbial flagpole and then yank them down again, and, in the end, to conclude.**

This is how they gain **clarity**, an essential quality for effective leadership and self-management.

Yet, I'm constantly hearing typical leaders and managers telling me they don't have time to think. Imagine the implications of that!

### What you can do

If you realize this is something you want and need to do, here are some ideas I apply and some that have worked for coaching clients.

- **It begins with respect:**

1) Respect for **yourself** as a leader or key contributor; that *you need this time to be at your best*. It is an investment, not a luxury.

2) Respect for **thinking itself**. Thinking is not an *evasion* of work. Thinking is not a *substitute* for work, or something you do *instead* of working. **Thinking IS work!** In fact, thinking may well prove to be some of the hardest work you'll ever do — and some of the most important.

Thoughtful, intelligent planning leads to a more efficient and effective approach to your work, leading to greater results!

- **Find your prime time.** All of us have certain biorhythms that determine when

we're at our sharpest mentally. For some, it's first thing in the morning. For others, it's later in the day. Don't waste your prime time on lesser activities that can be done when you're more tired and less creative. Protect your prime time for thinking, planning, and most critical activities.

- **Put it on your calendar.** Many people struggling to find time to think can get there only by putting it specifically on their calendars. Identify thinking space and protect it tenaciously. Some individuals I've worked with have created Outlook alerts that pop up and remind them to stop and take a thinking break.
- **Get help.** One CEO I coach regularly has enlisted his administrative assistant (who controls his schedule) to carve out at least 90 minutes each day where no meetings or appointments will be scheduled. That's when he thinks, plans, and does individual work.
- **Get a change of scenery.** This has proven extremely helpful for me. There've been many times I felt completely dull and uncreative sitting in my office staring at a computer. I can sometimes do more in 30 minutes at a coffee shop or eating alone in a restaurant with a pad of paper at hand than I can in two hours at a desk. Try a change of scenery to stimulate thinking. Take a break; get some exercise; walk the dog, even if you don't have a dog.
- **Reject perfectionism!** The search for the perfect solution is a hindrance here. *Some* improvement is better than nothing. Try a Ready-Fire-Aim approach: Get started, and improve from there. It's always easier to steer a moving car than a parked one.

Try some of these ideas, and see how they work for you in your pursuit of greater effectiveness. **L**