

HOW TO FREE SOME BRAIN-TIME?

BY MARION GAMEL

All leaders suffer from a similar challenge: While their business grows and becomes more complex, they have less time to think. As a result, they miss signs and react when they should pre-empt.

Here is a 3-step approach to free two to four hours of your time every week, which you will be able to spend thinking, exposing yourself to inspiring insight, or just relaxing because great ideas rarely occur when we're running between meetings or answering emails.



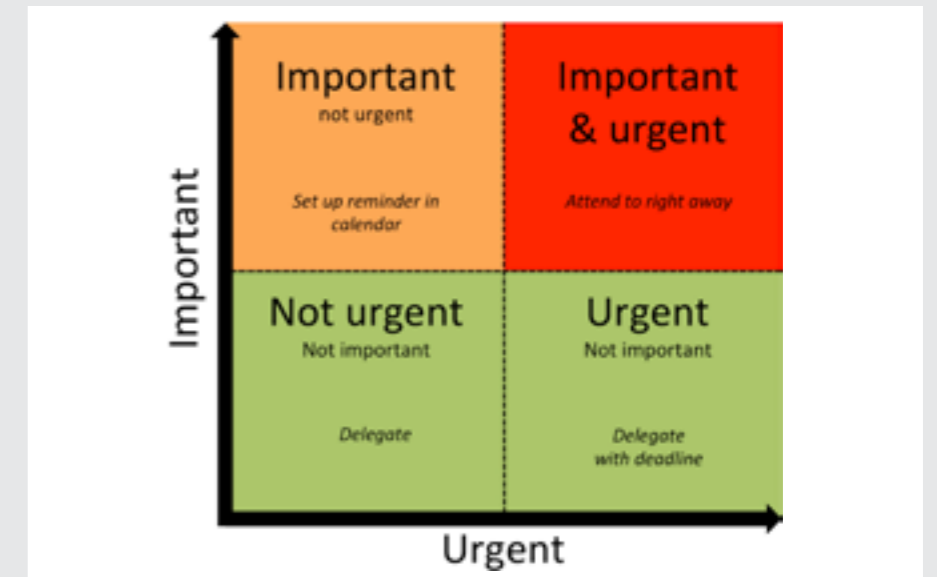
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Step 1 - Identify your "time-suckers"

Imagine you want to lose weight. You seek the help of a nutritionist. The first thing this practitioner asks you to do is to keep a food diary for a couple of weeks so you realise what, when and how much you eat. I have the same approach with time keeping. For two weeks, use your calendar (Outlook, Gmail...) to track how you spend every single minute at work. Your meetings will already be in your calendars and similarly to your main meals - in the nutritionist analogy - you are likely to be aware of them. What you need to track with great diligence is the rest: "Urgent" emails, interruptions, corridor conversations, time spent helping others, chasing reports or looking for information... As soon as you see patterns emerging, colour code the recurring "time suckers" in your calendar. Do this diligently over a couple of weeks. I promise you an "Aha!" moment: Here they are, your time-suckers. Let's deal with them.

Step 2 - Declutter and de-prioritise

- **People:** Are they in the right role or level of seniority? Are they competent and empowered? Ask HR to help assess capabilities, list required competencies at each level and put in place training or coaching if needed.
- **Tasks:** Create dashboards so you stop spending time looking for data. Automate responses and reminders. Create templates, so what you receive is in a format you've approved and what you draft is repetitive and becomes easier with time.
- **Meetings:** Is it possible to combine some of them? Ask HR to run surveys on meetings, so you identify the ones that are less efficient and can be cancelled as well as the ones you are only invited to join out of habit or courtesy. Impose a 45-minutes meeting policy.
- **Processes:** If you spend time setting up deadlines, chasing other people's work, approving the same type of thing week on week... You probably need the help of an Operation Manager to set processes in place so (s)he can chase on your behalf and "filter" before demands reach you.
- **Delegate more:** Before you open an email, let alone answer it. Before you get involved in a task, ask yourself "Am I the ONLY person who can do this?". In short: Is "this" really, truly, something that you should spend time on? Your company probably grew fast. Not so long ago you were wearing 10 hats. Now you're the only person at the top who can do pretty much everything, but it does not mean you should still do everything! Think in terms of spend. Your salary is probably amongst the highest in the company. Is it a good ROI if you do this task? Wouldn't it be more commercially astute to ask someone



else in your team (who costs less) to do it?

- **Instantly differentiate what is urgent from what is important.** In our culture of impatience and "being busy", the two have dangerously blurred. Draw a simple 4 square chart on a post-it note and stick it to your screen.
- **My last advice to declutter your load is to be aware of what you like -** that you probably invest time in, even though it could be delegated - versus what you dislike - which you are likely to be more stringent about. The best way to differentiate the two is to watch out for physical signs. If you get excited when you receive an email, it's something you like. Immediately run it through the urgent/important test and act accordingly.

Step 3 - Free your brain

You're starting to see some welcome breaks in your schedule, which you can use to feed and free your brain. You now need to ring fence this new freedom and ensure bad habits don't creep back in.

1. **Block thinking time:** Create meetings "with yourself". To make sure your thinking time becomes a sacred habit, make it regular and recurrent. You're much more likely to respect your me-time if you block 2 hours every Thursday morning than if you block ½ hour whenever you can throughout the week at random times. Your team will get accustomed to your me-time, they'll respect it and work around it.

2. **Create the best possible environment for your brain:** First, identify what your environment was the last time you had an epiphany. What was it that created food for thoughts? Were you reading a fascinating article? Listening to a speaker at a conference? Having a conversation with a fellow leader or employee? Where you even at work?! Were you listening to music? Running along the seafront? In front of a great piece of art? Be aware of the perfect environment that frees and feeds your brains. Re-create it during the time you've blocked. If you can't step out of the office, draft a list of thought-inducing questions that you benefit from thinking about every week: How to boost efficiency? What are the future challenges are we not prepared for? What would Steve Job do? During that thinking time, book a meeting room, where others can't find you, and switch off notifications on your phone.

So here you have it, the efficient yet simple 3-step process to free time for your brain: Identify time suckers. Get rid of them. Diligently and regularly re-create the perfect environment to induce thoughts and creativity. **MBR**

Credit: Marlon Gamel

EDITOR'S Note

Marion Gamel is a C-level executive with over 20 years of experience. Having started her career as an entrepreneur, Marion then worked for Google and Eventbrite. Her last role was Chief Marketing Officer of Betsson Group and Chief Executive Officer of Betsson Services. Marion has been coaching Entrepreneurs, Founders and C-Executives around the world since 2015. Every month, Marion answers questions sent by business leaders based on the island. For a chance to have your question answered in Malta Business Review, or if you think you would benefit from business coaching, you can contact Marion at: marion.gamel@gmail.com