

## Management Insights

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### Making Time to Think

*Government culture values getting things done. But thinking — proactive thinking — is crucial.*

**By Babak Armanjani**

Do you think? Do you have time to think about your work? Not to fret but to think? Do you think strategically? Do you think about those critical details? Do you think by yourself? Do you reflect on the lessons of each success and each failure? Do you think with others? Do you think with people who think differently from you? Do you think about possibilities as well as problems? Do you create (in your mind)? Do you invite others to think? Do you make time to think?



Babak Armanjani today advocates making time for thinking but in several contexts. I would agree, but perhaps recast his suggestion a bit. Policy and fiscal analysis may be necessary, but we have all experienced "paralysis by analysis." Government officials are as capable of over-thinking a problem as they are of under-thinking it. For me, the constant challenge was getting myself and my staff to think more about, in particular, the connection between the overarching goal (of the project or effort) and the tactical issues we faced. Strategy and consternation are too often applied to issues which are, in the long run, immaterial to the public value at hand.

— Stephen Goldsmith

This might sound self evident, but I'm writing to encourage you to make the time to think. You were educated to think. And, you were hired and promoted, at least in part, because you are good at thinking. Yet in government you work in a culture that values activity over thinking.

Some jobs give you time to think. Not so with being a public manager. So often, my clients tell me they value our time together because they "don't have time to think." Your day presents you with so many opportunities to do, to decide, to control, to motivate, to problem-solve, to assess and to communicate that you often are left with no time to think. I'm not suggesting that you are doing these important tasks thoughtlessly, but rather that most of your thought is necessarily reactive rather than proactive.

This column deals with proactive thought.

#### The Five Percent Rule

What's the big deal? Ours is a culture that values activity — doing. It is important at work to be seen as being busy. This is a good thing. "She gets things done" is a wonderful complement. Except for a few jobs, such

as being a scholar or an R&D person, most work necessitates a lot of doing. Certainly doing is the overwhelming expectation for public managers.

Think of the polarities of thinking, on the one hand, and activity, on the other hand, as being like riding a bicycle. If you just steer the bike and don't pedal, you are going nowhere. If you just pedal without steering you are going anywhere. Pedaling guided by steering takes you somewhere.

My hypothesis is that proactively guided action is more valuable than reactive action. So, while it's mostly about action, taking just 5 percent of your day to guide your actions with proactive thinking can make a huge difference. Below I give you a little formula for making 27 minutes to proactively think each day. But first, consider some various types of proactive thinking:

- *Reflective thought* involves making the time to reflect on recent past action. What worked? What didn't? Why? What lessons does this hold for the future?
- *Visionary thought* involves making the time to think through how things could be better and how best to communicate a positive vision for the future. Visioning involves letting go of your attention to limitations and constraints and doing some constructive "dreaming" for a moment.
- *Analytic thought* involves the study of data and the application of logic to a set of circumstances, particularly to a problem you are trying to solve. Good managers do this often. The key to analysis is curiosity. Too much analysis is focused on proving an assumption rather than exploring possibilities.
- *Strategic thought* involves exploration of possible ways to reach a goal. The barrier to good strategy is erroneous assumptions. So the best kind of strategic thought involves naming and even challenging those assumptions.

And thought can be done individually or collectively. Every organization is different, but most of my clients complain that they don't make enough time for collective thinking. There is a very good reason for this — collective thinking is hard to do.

When I'm thinking to myself, I am usually a very amiable collaborator. I'm comfortable with my way of thinking, and most of my ideas make great sense to me. Attention deficit is the only thing that can get in my way. Thinking with others, however, is much more difficult. Other people think wrong. And, they tend to interrupt my train of thought. And I hate it when they disagree with my great thinking.

Collective thinking requires structure, discipline and most of all, practice. We can actually learn how to think together. The most successful public managers master the art of thinking collectively, and they can teach and facilitate others in so doing.

### **Twenty-Seven Minutes a Day**

You probably work at least 10 hours a day. But let's say it's an easy day and you work nine hours — that's 540 minutes. If you buy the 5 percent rule, that means you need to try to make 27 minutes for proactive thinking.

- Start the day by thinking for *one minute* about what you want the outcome of the day's work to be. Not what you are going to do, but rather what you want the result to be. Write this down on a sheet of scratch paper.

- End each meeting with *10 minutes* of collective thinking on "what did we learn" in this meeting. Note the lessons on a sheet of flip chart paper.
- Before a difficult meeting with your boss, a subordinate or an important stakeholder, make *three minutes* to map out your strategy for the meeting. How will you get to the outcome you want? Make the notes you need to keep yourself strategically aligned in the meeting.
- Next time you are in a meeting where analysis is taking place, get the group to use *10 minutes* to explore a question, derived from your curiosity, about what the numbers mean.
- In preparing to make an important presentation, make *three minutes* to envision a very positive picture of the possible future. Inspire your audience by starting the presentation with that picture.

That's 27 minutes to take you somewhere instead of anywhere. Trying to "take" the time is almost useless. For public managers, the time is rarely there for the taking. Make the time.

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