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# Thinking

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## From the Editor

Not so long ago in one of the groups I was facilitating, a participant turned to a colleague and said, "A candle loses nothing by lighting another candle." It reminded me of another observation of a similar ilk which, in paraphrase, asserts that if we share an idea with someone else we don't lose the idea but it multiplies.

The first observation is far more poetic and that's the attraction for me. But either way, the point is the same.

So much of what we do at LIVE Consultants is to light candles hoping that when we do brighter possibilities can be found.

*Marilyn Baetz, editor*

## About the Author and the Article

You've heard it or said it yourself: "So much to do, so little time." In such situations it feels like the only thing to do is work faster, do several things at once, keep running at breakneck speed — dance, dance, dance.

The problem is there is never enough time to do what humans do so well: think. "My observation," Stephen Baetz says, "is that most organizations would serve themselves well if there was more thinking done and less compulsiveness around scavenging for every byte and attempting to constantly multi-task."

Stephen goes on to offer a number of suggestions for how to get more think-time and what to do when you have it.

Stephen is a principal of LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization which sponsors this publication.



*Stephen Baetz*

# Just Give Me Some Time to Think

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Here's something that you can take home and tell your family: Humans aren't good at multi-tasking. And it's not that we haven't tried. Heaven knows we have. We download messages and thumb our response at the same time we're ordering a bagel which is done as we make a mental note to send an e-mail when we get to work and then we pick up the phone to call a colleague in the hope that we can get them before their day gets too busy but that doesn't work so we leave a voice mail with an invitation at the end for the person to call us when they get a chance which they do just as we are scanning a report that was sent minutes ago which is preparation for the meeting we are going into and the one from which we will have to excuse ourselves because, despite all the electronic scheduling devices we have, we have double-booked ourselves but not to worry the meeting isn't well-managed so we can do the BlackBerry prayer and get some e-mails out to schedule everybody for a conference call at noon.

When we are exhausted in our efforts to multi-task, we huddle in corners with others and bemoan the fact that *it* never ends. But we suck it up and keep going. For whatever reason, we listen to the technorati who have a trench coat full of electronic devices that will keep us wired, in touch, and up to the second. "After all" they argue, "connectivity is essential. You want to have the best available data the moment you need it."

Data's good, we reason, so we sign up for technology we barely know how to turn on and recommit ourselves to the gods of multi-tasking and data foraging.

Here's the problem; okay, here's a problem — the more data we gather, the more we want. And the more we try to satisfy our data craving, the less we are able to discern or be informed. So we go for more. And to deal with all the distraction around us, we resort to multi-tasking (doing a bunch of small things rapidly and in succession), hoping the batteries don't fail, the call isn't dropped, our pithy message doesn't float aimlessly into the ether.

Where was I? Oh yes. I started by saying that humans aren't good at multi-tasking (a

term by the way that was first applied to machines and adopted by humans). "Drivers on cell phones are four times more likely to be involved in an accident ... [and] ... a large proportion of plane crashes can be traced to cockpit interruptions and distractions" writes John Lorine in the April edition of The Walrus. Nor, for that matter, are we good at memory (a term first ascribed to humans but adopted by machines). But somehow or other we've assumed that our memories ought to operate like a machine; every time recall is pressed, the copy comes out exactly as filed. Human memory doesn't operate that way at all; it is selective, malleable. And thank goodness it is or we wouldn't be able to forgive or hope or trust.

What is the human mind good for? Reading, distinguishing, and matching patterns.

It's called thinking. And thinking requires that we not be distracted by the siren call to multi-task or to gulp more data with our lattes. It requires our undivided attention, a full share of mind, our dedicated concentration.

Thinking requires that we discern, we sort, we differentiate, detect, distinguish, discover, identify, uncover, integrate, combine, connect, merge, and conclude.

My observation is that most organizations would serve themselves well if there was more thinking done and less compulsiveness around scavenging for every byte and attempting to constantly multi-task. Therefore in service of that end, I offer some suggestions for how to get more think-time and what to do when you have it.

**Suggestion: Schedule periodic meetings with your team that are purely dedicated to thinking.**

That's right. Just thinking. A plan doesn't have to emerge, a To Do list doesn't have to be created, a critical path doesn't have to be formulated. Those activities can sometimes act as distractions as team members search for the best thing to do and avoid describing or defining the patterns they see and determining what is the same or different than other

situations. Don't do this every day or even every week. But what about once a month or once a quarter?

This suggestion does not imply that thinking can't or shouldn't be done at other meetings. But a meeting just for thinking allows you and members of your team to stand back to see forward.

**Suggestion: Agree to terms of engagement that minimize distractions in team meetings.**

Thinking requires a clear head. Which means that electronic distracters which ring and ping should be silenced and set aside. Promise breaks so those who must drink from the electronic fire hose can do so. Then take a few minutes so people can recover, leave the distractions behind, and reconnect with the issue at hand.

Define what urgent is for those who aren't in the meeting so there's less of a chance that they will knock on the door wanting to evacuate a team member or two to handle some emergency.

**Suggestion: Distinguish between data, information, insight, and wisdom.**

Data are numbers or facts. When data are organized, trends can be observed which, when it happens well, is information. When meaning is made of the information, insight happens. And when insights are organized and patterns are found, wisdom occurs. There's no doubt that thinking needs data; but the mere consumption of data does not mean that thinking has occurred. Thinking only starts as information emerges. For sure, as insights and wisdom are sought, thinking is in full flight.

Dedicate the thinking time you have as a team to the insight and wisdom levels. Ask members of the team to identify patterns and comment on how those patterns are like or unlike what has been seen before.

And avoid the temptation to use thinking time to trade random pieces of data; these distractions can be as disconcerting as a candy wrapper at a concert.

**Suggestion: Think about what matters.**

How do you know what matters and what doesn't? Apply a simple test when faced with the urge to gather more data on an issue: ask, "If I know the answer to that, what will I know?" If it's not worth knowing, don't gather data, and, for sure, don't invest time in turning it into information.

A similarly helpful question is, "How will knowing this help me or help us?" Again, if digging for more data isn't going to help in either the shorter or the longer term, go to what is helpful.

**Suggestion: Use questions as triggers to the thinking process.**

Well-chosen questions guide thinking without implying what the answer should be. Here are some worth trying:

- ✓ What do we know?
- ✓ How do we know that?
- ✓ What do we think we know but don't?
- ✓ What patterns exist?
- ✓ What causes the outcome we have?
- ✓ How should we organize the information we have?
- ✓ What are the common characteristics?
- ✓ How is this problem/situation the same as/different from others we have encountered?
- ✓ How does this support/undermine what else we know?
- ✓ What explanations don't work?
- ✓ What explanations are possible?
- ✓ What are the underlying assumptions?
- ✓ What is cause and what is effect?
- ✓ What should we rethink?
- ✓ Why?
- ✓ Why not?
- ✓ What would happen if we believed just the opposite of what we think we know?

Questions like these when asked and answered in a serious-minded way should minimize distractions and the urge to run the multi-tasking treadmill.

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