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 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*
Frankly, I don’t believe Schmidt would be managing Yale either — at 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 businessperson who, walking down the halls of his or her office, sees a colleague leaning back in his chair, with 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 really be furiously burning brain cells trying to solve an important problem or creating a brilliant new business idea, but appearances would be taken 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.”

Being constantly in demand as a speaker, Doc received frequent invitations. The phone call often went like this:

“Doctor Brandt, what are you doing on April 12th and 13th?”

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 though 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.

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, that you need this time to be at your best; 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 well can be some of the hardest work you’ll ever do — and some of the most important.

- **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.

  - **Put it on your calendar**. Most people who are struggling to find the time can only get there by actually putting it on their calendar. Some people I’ve worked with have set up Outlook alerts that pop up and remind them to stop and take a thinking break.

  - **Get help**. One CEO I work with regularly has enlisted the administrative assistant who controls his schedule to find 90-120 minutes each day where no meetings or appointments will be scheduled. That’s when he thinks, plans, and does individual work he must do.

  - **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 Starbucks 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.

  - **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. !