

3 Ways to Clear Your Mind and Make Space for Big-Picture Thinking

Fast Company | Art Markman | April 22, 2025



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If you feel like you're accomplishing a lot, but not anything of longer-term significance, here's how to reset and make time to tackle bigger goals.

Take a look at your to-do list. Does it seem never-ending? The thing about task lists is that they are filled with specific things you need to accomplish. Combine that with an ever-expanding inbox, and you have a recipe for busy work days.

While you may get many things done, you may not feel like they are adding up to a more significant contribution to the mission of your workplace or your own big-picture goals. To ensure that the specific things you're doing lead to important outcomes, you need some time in your schedule to reflect on the big-picture goals you have and their relationship to the actions you're taking day-to-day.

Here are a few things you can do to clear the mental space to make sure your days are not just busy, but productive.

The value of unstructured time

Ensuring that your daily activities lead up to something more substantial will not happen by magic. Instead, you need to regularly save some time that is not devoted to the particular tasks that are already on your task list.

There are several purposes for this time. You want to reflect on whether the things that take up most of your time are related to the most important goals both for you and the organization. Chances are, there are many things you have to do each day that do not contribute significantly to that mission.

Identify some of the activities that soak up your time that are not that productive. Are they necessary? Are there things you're doing that you can put further down the list of priorities? Do you need to talk to your supervisor about some of the things that clutter your calendar?

Are there things you should be doing to make your contribution that are not happening? You also want to have a list of activities you're not doing that you need to be doing. You'll need to figure out how to add more of those into your daily and weekly schedule.

Finding a space to make space

One problem with trying to take a big-picture view of things is that you are likely to be surrounded by reminders to take care of the next task. You probably have documents on your desk and your computer desktop that need to be completed. You have an email inbox with a constant drip of new messages crying out to be answered. You have DMs from team members asking for information.

That can make it difficult to disconnect enough to create the mindset you need to think about strategic issues. It can be helpful to use physical distance from your most pressing tasks to think strategically.

Consider taking a walk or going to a conference room at your workplace that has a whiteboard. The distance has two benefits: First, it separates you from the specific reminders of the tasks at hand; second, psychology research suggests that physical distance can actually help you think more abstractly about your work. When you think more abstractly, you're better able to ignore the specific tasks and focus on the primary accomplishments you'd like to achieve as well as the general barriers that may stand in the way of success.

Drawing your big-picture goals

When talking about strategic goals, we often use phrases like achieving a vision or seeing the future. Yet we also tend to lay out our goals in written documents. Sometimes, it can be helpful to take the language of envisioning more literally.

Sketches and diagrams may be helpful for changing the way you think about your desired contribution. So many of our workplace tools involve writing (like email, instant messages, and meeting agendas) that we get locked into needing the right words to describe what we want to bring about.

Grab a big sheet of paper or use a whiteboard. Leave the words behind at first and just sketch out processes, concepts, or prototypes. Don't worry if you don't think you're good at capturing likenesses. The power of sketches and diagrams comes from being able to use space as an element of your thinking to engage the massive amount of brain real estate devoted to vision more deeply.