

How to avoid stress and burnout

Opinion **Managing Yourself**

Silence breaks through the noise of success

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In the delusion that seating employees in open spaces will magically facilitate collaboration, we now occupy offices where it is impossible to think © iStock

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Silence isn't the predictable Mumbai memory. The city's roaring frenzy is unforgettable: the beeping of auto rickshaws, the horns of gridlocked drivers, the thunder of thousands on the move, 24 hours a day. Yet what sticks in my memory is silence.

Last month I visited the headquarters of Transasia Bio-Medicals, a large in vitro diagnostics business. I talked for an hour with its senior leaders, discussing motivated teams, collaboration, thorny issues of reward and innovation. When the allotted hour was up, everyone was keen to return to work. But not yet. Which is when I got my surprise.

"Could we just sit for two minutes and reflect on what we've just heard?" asked Suresh Vazirani, the chairman. We sat in relative silence — you could still hear traffic — for that time. Afterwards, I asked Mr Vazirani if this was routine. "Oh yes," he said. "It's important to stop and think."

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Executives are paid to think. It is the most important thing they do, but they almost never have time. We slam from one meeting into another, interlaced with phone calls, emails and corridor conversations, trying to make mental notes that we will assemble when we get the time, which never arrives.

At one stage in my career I held down two jobs in television (sadly for the price of one). This became so maddening I resorted to making an appointment with myself: every Thursday, 11:30am to 1pm, was blocked out in my calendar.

On a nice day I'd go for a walk, when it rained I'd sit in a café. And I'd think: about politics, projects, people, the emotional tenor of the week. This was when I recalled important questions that had gone unanswered, when I found solutions to what appeared intractable problems. It was when I had ideas.

Thinking time is a rare and precious commodity that few organisations value. Managers cling to the power to interrupt and being busy is a surrogate marker of status. All of this is disruptive and destructive. Yet finding the time to think needn't be so hard. Mr Vazirani's two minutes of silence is easy — no app required — and costs nothing. My appointment with myself was simple to arrange and my assistant protected it against all-comers. Many executive coaches recognise that their chief value lies in creating the time and space in which their clients can think.

A banker in Canada once described with deep nostalgia a workplace rule forbidding meetings before 10am or after 4pm; those boundaries provided uninterrupted time to think when, he said, he did his most important work.

Some companies declare meeting-free days. Leslie Perlow, a professor at Harvard Business School, wrote a study charting how a tech firm [increased productivity](#) when it introduced quiet time. Productivity rose in some instances by more than 60 per cent.

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The science of silence suggests that it promotes new brain cells in the [hippocampus](#), the area associated with memory and learning. But we put people into working conditions that militate against silence and thinking.

In the delusion that seating employees in open spaces will magically facilitate collaboration, we now occupy offices where it is impossible to think. One chief operating officer confided to me that

the fad was about cost-cutting.

And in 2013 [researchers](#) studying 43,000 workers concluded the distraction of open plan outweighed unproved benefits of easy interaction. In a board meeting last month, I heard eminent retirees advocate open plan offices, but their own rise had taken place in offices with walls and doors. How successful would they have been working closely alongside their colleagues?

Transasia's Mr Vazirani considers his two minutes of silence after every meeting a fundamental part of his company's success. It gives everyone time to consolidate what they've heard, and organise their thoughts. And it shows that thinking counts. Now, in the meetings that matter, I'm introducing my two minutes' worth – of silence.

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Andrew Hill is away

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