



# Executive Think Time

Thinking That Yields Results

[Sample Chapter]

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## Introduction

Executive Think Time? What is that? Time for executives to think?

Executives are busy, stressed, focused on results, and moving at ever increasing speed. Executives do not have enough time to do what they are doing now. There are downsizings, budget pressures, employee demands, and reorganizations. How can there be time to think?

As executive coaches, we have worked with senior executive leaders from a variety of industries over several years. Our clients have told us in detail what the dilemma is.

Many executives know they are moving too fast. They realize that they don't get enough sleep, they don't exercise as much as they used to, they don't take all of their vacation time, they miss activities with their friends and sometimes their families. They multitask, skip lunch, work late, juggle priorities, and fight fires.

And here is the crux of the problem. Most of our clients tell us that they do not want to work this way but feel they have to. They feel that in today's competitive market place you have to work at this frenzied pace or you will be eliminated.

Senior executives feel they have no choice; this is the way business is, no time to think or plan. Instead, they must be ready, be flexible, and be quick so that they can react to variables that change daily. It is a common assumption that being a high achiever means that you say yes to every challenge, juggle several tasks at once, move fast, and, whatever you do, don't drop any balls.

So, executives work longer hours, push staff harder, reduce personal time. These responses seem to work in the short run. However, the root of the problem

remains. Often, both the executive and staff are left wondering what all the activity is about and questioning where they are going.

Even with all the long hours and hard work, people still feel unprepared. Continually trying to get caught up, they are definitely never ahead of the curve. They feel behind the eight ball, pressured to work on things that seem urgent but are not always the most important.

What is missing is the time to think. We call this missing component Executive Think Time. And no executive feels they can afford to take it.

We have a different view. Through our work coaching hundreds of senior executives, we have learned three key things:

1. Executives feel they cannot afford to take time out to “think.” We say executives can’t afford not to take the time if they are going to be successful.
2. Executives feel they are already working so hard. We say that taking time to think, Executive Think Time, is actually the real work of a successful senior leader. Executive Think Time is time to visualize, strategize, plan, focus, and align. These are all critical success factors for executives.
3. Even when executives are convinced of the benefits of taking time to think, they do not know what “to do” exactly in that time, what to think about specifically. We have learned that the value is in the inquiry, and we can suggest some specific useful questions. It’s not just about the quantity of time spent thinking; it’s about the quality and value that gets created from that time. The results of Executive Think Time are the best possible strategies, goals,

and actions for your organization. Executive Think Time is about getting breakthrough results.

So what is in it for busy executives? Why should executives even consider the idea that they make more time to think?

If you are a senior leader in an organization, imagine having even one additional hour to just think about your business. An hour to reflect on what's happening with: revenue, your people, expenses, new products, the organization's culture, productivity, and profit.

We have seen the importance of using think time in this way. Executives who use think time feel more in control, have less stress, do better strategic planning, and are better leaders. These executives do less fire fighting, are less reactive and more productive. And maybe most important, they enjoy their jobs more as they produce better results.

Whether you are a seasoned executive or a new executive, this book will help you:

- See the value of Executive Think Time
- Learn how to structure and adapt Executive Think Time to work for you
- Answer powerful questions designed to challenge you to a higher and broader level of thinking

## **How To Use This Book**

This book is based on our experience working with successful executives. It is intended to offer practical information on specific steps you can take to create high-quality Executive Think Time.

Each chapter presents an important objective and the ideas executives need to put into action to accomplish it. Then we give you the following tools to assess your progress:

*Self-Awareness Check:* Useful questions, specifically designed to have executives get honest with themselves about their current situation. The questions also prompt ideas for action.

*The Coaches' Perspective:* Comments from us as Executive Coaches on the typical issues and solutions we have seen with our own clients. The brief comments we give are examples of what would be more in-depth coaching customized for a specific executive's situation.

So read the material, actually answer the questions, and start creating Executive Think Time for yourself and your organization.

By the way, we didn't just coach our clients and write the book. We worked the Executive Think Time model ourselves. We answered the same types of questions for our own businesses. We took time out to work the model for our own challenges. That is how we learned how valuable it is.

# Chapter 1

## Making the Shift

If you are reading this book it may be because you are feeling busy but not productive. You may feel that you are not in control of your time or that you just don't have any. Do you feel immersed in details that your staff should be handling? Or are you solving problems that could have been prevented if you had just had some time to think?

Today's fast-paced world values action and results. Both are necessary, but are you spending your time on the *right* actions and focused on the *right* results? If you are reading this book, your answer might be no. So how do you know if you are spending your time on the right actions and results? The right actions come from thought-out strategies and plans, which in turn come from a vision for the future. As an executive it's your job to be thinking about where you want to be in the future – whether it's 6 months, 1 year, 3 years or 5 years out -- and creating the strategies and plans to get there.

From our experience coaching executives, we've learned that the higher you go in an organization the more important it is to be strategic. Yet we observe that most executives spend 20% or less of their time on what we call strategic thinking. When you think strategically you are thinking ahead and projecting into the future. You lay out your plans and moves in advance of any actions. You anticipate what might happen in response to your plans or the specific tactics that you plan to employ. You are proactive rather than reactive and have well developed contingency

plans. When you are tactical you focus on execution. You implement the strategies, plans, and tactics. Your time horizon is the here and now not the future. Going deeper into the organization, the percentage of time spent on strategic thinking is even lower for junior executives and senior managers, who are busy with tactical activities, whether they are carrying out plans or responding to the crisis du jour. We believe that it's important for strategic thinking to increase at all levels but especially at the top. While there are no black and white answers, we suggest the following guidelines for the amount of time executives and managers should allocate for strategic and tactical matters:

	Sr. Manager	Jr. Executive	Sr. Executive
Strategic	30-40%	50-60%	70-80%
Tactical	60-70%	40-50%	20-30%

You may be looking at this chart in disbelief and thinking “no way”! You may be skeptical about the importance of Executive Think Time. But if you are committed to increasing your effectiveness as an executive, then it's necessary to make three shifts in thinking about your time:

1. Strategic thinking is equally if not more important than tactical activities and the key to your success.
2. Intentionality, not reactivity, creates desired and sustainable results.
3. You are in control of your time and schedule.

The first step to getting desired results is making the shift to a belief in the benefits of strategic think time. Our beliefs drive our actions, which in turn give us results. Without a shift in belief, you may take different actions but you are likely to

get the same results and to expend more effort than required. So accepting that “strategic thinking is equally if not more important than tactical activities” is the first step to getting the results you want. We know that it’s easy to get drawn into tactical activities. You often see results immediately. Strategic thinking and planning can be amorphous and do not bring the same sense of immediate accomplishment. So with Executive Think Time, we’ll help make the time you put into strategic thinking yield some immediate action and results.

The second step is to make the shift to valuing intentionality over reactivity. Intentionality is your ability to act deliberately: to have desired goals and outcomes, take regular committed action, and manage distractions and circumstances to stay focused on your goals.

The third critical shift that supports intentionality is to see that you are in charge of your time and priorities, no one else. We know that it may not seem that way, but you must start to spend your time on activities that are linked to goals and objectives that you have set either individually or as part of a larger team or organization. Without intentionality, your day will be consumed by other people’s priorities.

Executives who deliberately set aside think time are more likely to get the results they want. They tend to be more successful – and less stressed.

### **Self-Awareness Check**

Which description best describes your approach?

- a. I spend little to no time thinking about the future but take lots of action

- b. I spend some time thinking about the future and take lots of action
- c. I spend considerable time thinking about the future but take little action
- d. I spend considerable time thinking about the future and take lots of action

### **The Coaches' Perspective**

If you answered “a”, you’re probably in reactive mode. It’s likely that your actions are not intentional and seldom linked to strategies and plans. You may not be getting the results that you want. Your first steps are to build your foundation and create the space for Executive Think Time (see Chapters 2 and 3).

If you answered “b”, you need to ask, are the actions you take linked to your strategies and plans? Are you skilled at managing distractions and whatever circumstances arise? The bigger question is, are you satisfied with the quantity and quality of your think time? If you aren’t, then your immediate focus needs to be on optimizing your think time (see Chapters 4 and 5). Even if you are satisfied, what else might be possible if you were to increase both the quality and quantity of your think time?

If you answered “c”, then you are spending too much time thinking, in “analysis paralysis,” and not enough time acting. Your first step is to get into action! Then increase the quality of the time you spend on think time (see Chapter 5).

If you answered “d”, look to see if you can optimize your think time. Maybe you don’t have to work so hard!