

# Preparation: Why It Matters and How to Do It More Effectively

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**"I'm too busy**—I simply don't have time to prepare."

Time and time again, I hear this sentiment from busy executives leading large organizations and working to drive forward significant endeavors. Whether it is restructuring their business, launching a new initiative, or simply sustaining an already high level of success, in our overwired world, I increasingly encounter leaders working in a frenzied and unfocused way. Simply put, they believe that they are too busy to think deeply and strategically.

Although most great leaders know what they want to achieve, they often still fail to prepare properly. This lack of preparation comes at a high cost: it wastes significant amounts of time, money, and energy while eroding their wellbeing and results. Learning to proactively invest the time to optimize is a discipline that is central to creating more flow and becoming more effective and efficient.

Before I outline how you can prioritize preparation, consider the following three examples of leaders whose lack of preparation is compromising their ability to execute on key deliverables.

*At a recent board meeting, I reviewed a very detailed short and long-term strategic plan. There were over 12*

*goals, each with 5 to 7 strategic targeted initiatives and dates. While the planning was thorough and on point, there was a greater problem. The leader didn't have time to execute on daily demands, let alone think deeply about these projects. As a result, the strategic plan was stagnant.*

*During a recent coaching conversation, a client described a long list of deliverables that needed to be prepared prior to an upcoming global meeting in Peru in roughly 3 months. While she could identify her desired outcomes, she was presenting overlapping and interwoven projects. Planning forward felt like trying to eat only one strand of spaghetti at a time. Each noodle led to a second noodle, and this made productive planning a challenge. Because she had so many things on her plate, she was in crisis mode and worse yet, she wasn't tapping into available talent on her team.*

*Over a late-night beer, a leader recently lamented to me about the long hours he was working. His one point of joy was working on a new fixer-upper. He savored the morning hours to get physical, work on his new home, and skip the early morning commute. But there was one problem. While he was now arriving in the office at 10:00, many members on his team were working on a flexible 7:00 to 3:00 pm schedule. By the time he was aware of what needed to be done and had delegated the day's work, it was 11:30 am and many people on his team were off to lunch. As a result, most nights he was the last person in the office as he scrambled to complete deliverables.*

**So what is the solution? PREPARATION**

### Step 1: Create Bandwidth.

To think deeply, you need mental space and energy. Of course, it is easy to lament the chicken versus egg nature of the creating bandwidth (you need mental space and energy to create mental space and energy). But there is a way to troubleshoot the infinite demands on your bandwidth: Proactively create capacity to think deeply about the things that matter most.

While this may sound daunting, it's not. Start by writing down everything on your mind that you want to accomplish, and I do mean *everything*. Anything that is on your mind (personal or professional) should be on this list, including anything that is currently distracting you from thinking deeply and negatively impacting your bandwidth. If you are in a triage situation (e.g., in a chaos/crisis mode), highlight the most essential things you need to tackle (e.g., anything critical or bound to have the greatest impact). Anytime a new thought pops up, write it down.

In many respects, this process is like opting to use an external hard drive. When your computer's storage capacity is about to max out, it starts to act up and slow down. You can easily free up space by moving files onto an external hard drive. Your mind works the same way—your to-do list is your external storage device (a way to move but not lose information to free up internal space).

#### Hacks

- Create a to-do list as you transition to work and as you transition home. Feeling frazzled often means that you have too much on your mind or your plate, so carve out time to write everything down and reclaim your bandwidth.
- Put regular, reoccurring reminders in your calendar.

### Step 2: Get Clear on the Outcome

Once you have identified critical projects (anything that must get done or is vital to moving the dial forward), break these projects down into sub-steps or projects within projects.

Yes, this can be hard. You have to think deeply. Just as there is purposeful struggle associated with doing work, there is purposeful struggle involved in clarifying sub-steps, projects within projects etc. Again, as you work, notice if you have other open loops or unfinished projects that come to mind.

The more you think through the steps, sub-steps, and essentials, the more clearly you can communicate what needs to get done, effectively delegate tasks, and fully engage everyone on your team. Know what is important and identify where and how you can give other people latitude to execute on specific parts of the project.

If this is frustrating (e.g., you hate going slow and want to go faster), you are probably doing it right. It will get easier with time!

#### Hacks:

- Set yourself up for success: Find the right time of day and the right place to work.
- Focus on what really matters and be clear about what outcomes you hope to accomplish in what timeframe.
- Set yourself up for success: Find the right time of day and the right place to work.

### Step 3: Flexible on Approach.

Next, you want to optimize your efforts. What are the different options or approaches you can leverage to execute each task on your list? There are often multiple ways to achieve the same outcome. Challenge your habits and assumptions about how best to tackle this project. Taking time to brainstorm

different approaches helps ensure we are selecting the fastest, cheapest, and easiest method. But remember—one option isn't a choice. Only when you have three or more options are you presented with real choice.

### Hacks:

- Generate a list of options (e.g., a Plan B, Plan C etc.).
- Do this not only for your broader plan but for each sub-step of your plan.

### Step 4: Delegate.

Just because you can do everything, doesn't mean you should do everything. Ideally, you will think about who can execute on each task in the most cost effective and efficient way. Sure, any CEO can empty her trash, but at \$400 per hour is that really the best use of her time?

Call yourself whatever you like—a micro-manager, perfectionist, or control freak. If you have done Step 2 well, you should be able to pass on some of your work to others. In the process, you can create a learning opportunity for them and create more bandwidth for you.

Here, it is important to notice if you are resistant to delegating. Is it hard to articulate what you want and need? Do you need to be in control? Bear in mind that delegation is like any muscle. The more skilled you become at delegating, the easier it will get. Leverage delegation to your advantage as much as possible.

Still not convinced? Think about how fierce the competition is. If you're not leveraging talent in the best possible way, your chances of keeping up with the pack will be greatly diminished.

### Hacks:

- Know your team, their skills, and their availability. Even better, know what motivates them and how

to ask for their help. Delegate to them in ways they will find inspiring.

- The newer the relationship, the more explicit the contracting should be.
- Not sure if they got it? Ask people to email you what they are doing, how they are approaching it, what they see as the key deliverables, and when they will check in with you. Putting the ball in their camp builds trust.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



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Camille is a leadership expert and thought leader in virtual effectiveness. She is committed to helping others crack the code for understanding how to leverage technology, how to rewire for results, and how to optimize performance. For 20+ years, her work has focused on accelerating business results by improving individual, team, and organizational effectiveness and leadership capacities from the inside out.

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