

Trusting My Insight State of Mind



Since high school, the way I have worked best when I have had to write a paper or master a topic is to do a lot of reading and absorb as much data as possible. Unlike most of my friends, who would start by making an outline of the paper, I would let this information root around in my head for a couple of days before I got started. I did take notes while reading and absorbing the new information, but my process of letting things noodle always made me feel anxious. I thought that perhaps I wasn't doing what I was supposed to. I was never one to ask a lot of questions, take a lot of notes, create an outline and then proceed. Despite feeling anxious, I never followed the prescribed process and never did anything to change it. Eventually, what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it would become clear. I would then sit down and crank out a 10 page draft, having avoided an outline altogether.

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Understanding my insight process has freed me from feeling anxious about this any more, and not just about writing. If I'm in a conversation or in a meeting I hardly ever take notes now. I used to write feverishly; afraid I might forget something important. Now I just listen, knowing that if I am quiet and focused, what I hear will go into my brain and stay there. I don't have to worry about remembering it, because when I need it I can access it. It's enormously freeing, to sit in a conversation and not feel the need to take notes. I might jot down a word or a thought, and afterwards I might make notes to myself about things I want to do, but I don't worry about not remembering. This is how I have always naturally operated, but before I didn't trust it.

Before I started considering the nature of insight, I thought in order to access insight I had to walk to work along the river or go for a run to let myself flow and find that particular space in my head. Now I know that physical activity isn't necessary. Insights do tend to arrive when I walk to work along the river or when I'm running, but I can get into that insight state of mind anywhere and at any time. Even if I



wake up in the middle of the night with my mind cranking I can just kick those unwanted thoughts out of the way. My best state of mind comes more naturally now and I don't have to push thoughts out of the way as often as I used to.

Maybe some people operate in a good state of mind all the time, but I still find myself falling into my old habits more often than I'd like. When not getting the results I want I have to remind myself that doing more or trying harder is not necessarily the best answer. The same is true when I notice that I'm not in a good state of mind. Trying hard to get back to a good state doesn't work very well. In either case the "doing more" option just doesn't do the trick.

One of the major insights I've had about work concerns planning. We are nearing the end of our five-year plan and while we have been quite successful, what we are doing is not scalable the way it needs to be. About a year ago I started developing a new plan in my old style mentioned earlier, writing a lot of notes and the like. However, a few months ago I decided to just sit back and see what happens. Over a short period of time the new plan became clear to me, probably because I haven't been actively doing all those things I used to do. I didn't sit down and say: this is the external environment, this is our internal capacity, this is what's happening, or otherwise try to surmount the intellectual challenge of "figuring it out." Instead, it just came together on its own accord. Getting really clear about the direction for our business has been one of my greatest accomplishments.

As I turn in the direction of insight more often, solutions at work arise when they are needed and often aren't even recognized as insights. There may not be a seminal event like with the aha-moment of my five-year plan. Instead it might be more like an aha-afternoon, or even an a-ha month. Issues that I would have seen before as problems seem to diminish because of the myriad of resources made available to address them. It's as though fewer issues emerge and there is a greater accessibility to move through the work without creating initiatives around every problem. There are things to do, but

because all of the resources you need are at your disposal the work is less difficult.

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My last thoughts relate to my personal life. About a week ago I was quite swept up in what was happening in the environment around us, the election, the economy, and everything else. It had somehow gotten to me and put me in an awful state. The final straw occurred during a particularly miserable interaction with a colleague. Afterwards when a friend called, I was in tears and he happened to ask an odd question: Was there a particular feeling that I could identify? I thought for a second and then answered that I had felt disrespected both in the interactions that just occurred, but also in the national political environment. Immediately it was clear that that was it. Naming the source of my bad feeling was a huge relief, but even better, was the insight that I had while sleeping that night. All of these bad feelings that I had gotten caught up in were just my thoughts making me feel the way I was. Looking back, I feel like this shouldn't have come as such a surprise, but it was. I thought that I already knew bad feelings have a paralyzing effect and although they do not happen often for me, when they do they are powerful.

Learning more about insight has led me to trust my instincts and find a good mental place. While it's been very helpful in work and getting me out of some tough places, I think the more important effects for me have been personal.

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