

When Is *Your* Next Executive Session?

by Helen Kornblum

When I worked for an association in Virginia, the governing board and staff held long board meetings twice each year. When the board wanted to discuss confidential matters, they asked the staff to leave the room while they dealt with a critical issue. Once the staff departed, the board was in “executive session,” ready to act decisively.

The concept of executive session is a good metaphor for the kind of thoughtful processing that each of us needs if we’re going to be organized and productive. The executive inside us guides our work and personal lives, so we need to see how an executive session puts us into a proactive rather than a reactive position. We don’t have to be “the boss” to need a focused planning session. No matter what role we have in the business, we make decisions about our activities and contributions every day. Ready or not, planning is part of our day jobs.

What constitutes a good executive session? Here are a few suggestions:

1. Take a break from the perpetual activity that fills your workday. Shut down the phones and the interruptions that erode your productivity. Close the door and sit in a comfortable chair. Clear your mind of your unending “to do” list.
2. Identify the topic or issue you want to focus on. Use any notes that might be helpful or create a template for how you want to analyze an issue. You may not need any prompts if you are comfortable just rolling ideas around in your head.
3. Now comes the best part--think, reflect, plan. These are the most important and rewarding activities when running a business or a household. These are the moments when you rise above the distractions of work to gain an overview of what you’re doing.

Most of us don’t give ourselves enough time to think about business issues because we’re busy putting out fires, meeting deadlines, or trying to live up to someone else’s expectations of us. Without an occasional aerial view, however, we’re going to miss a bigger picture that can guide decisions, show us the consequences of what we have been doing, and invite ideas for what we could be doing. Business moved at a slower pace in earlier generations, which gave men and women more time to think about their goals. In today’s pressure cooker of activity and instantaneous communication, we need to restore the luxury of deliberate planning in our schedules.

Put an occasional executive session on your calendar, whether you're at a desk, behind the steering wheel, or at the kitchen table. Relax and think...a powerful combination for the executive inside you.

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