The Zen of Work: Hard Focus and Soft Focus

Published on Nov 20, 2017 by Niko Canner



People are wired to respond to rhythms. As we craft and improvise the way we engage in episodes at work, one particular rhythm that's valuable to reflect on is the alternation between **hard focus** and **soft focus**.

Hard focus is directed and specific: for example, debating a specific point, crafting the language of a slide, working through the interdependencies in a project plan. Soft focus is generative and reflective: for example, brainstorming or pausing to step above a meeting and reflect on the course the discussion is taking. These two modes *feel* very different, and they're each valuable in different ways.

There is great power in rhythmic alternation between these modes. For instance, some of the most powerful moments in meetings can come from shifting into soft focus as colleagues are engaged in hard focus, working through one issue after another, and letting the pieces of the conversation organize themselves into a new synthesis or suggest an important question that hasn't yet been considered. Similarly, after working alone in soft focus mode, for instance doing a mind map as preparation for working on a complex deliverable, it's valuable to switch into hard focus mode to get very specific about what needs to be done next and when that work should occur.

One particularly critical application of this rhythm of alternating hard and soft focus is in how one transitions *between* episodes. Because our work is so various, and because so much of it demands deep presence with others (clients, colleagues, etc.) and hard thinking, shifting from the intensity of one episode to the intensity of another, very different, perhaps unrelated episode can be challenging. Switching from short-cycle, rapid, more transactional engagement (e.g., working through one's inbox) to long-cycle, slower, more reflective work (e.g., working on a strategy document or a project plan) – and back again – is an endemic challenge in the work we do. Learning to blink from hard focus into soft focus and back helps with this. Finishing navigating a difficult negotiation over the phone, one blinks into soft focus to register a transition, then into hard focus to zoom in on the essence of the next episode – perhaps a coaching session with a team member – then

into soft focus to let emotions and thought patterns begin to glide from one mode into the other – then into hard focus to frame the meeting ahead or respond to a colleague's framing.

Deep presence always requires a moment of absence to clear away what was at the heart of the episode before. Rigorous, deliberate thinking requires energy that can only be summoned if interspersed with waves of working by habit and in flow. The glide of what's easy and natural should be punctuated by moments of explicit, hard focus to ensure that we're doing the right work in the best way we can.