# The Zen of Work: Making Each Moment Count

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We do our work in episodes. We sit, pick up the phone, or gather. We engage in discussion, read, rough out numbers, sketch a thought. We go a certain distance, and then the episode ends, and if the thread gets picked up, it's later, and another episode's begun.

One very simple way to divide episodes marks two categories: meetings and work by oneself. Effectiveness in shaping one's work in these two settings is a great deal of what drives productivity.

There aren't any rules at this level—episodes come in a thousand flavors. But one pattern for work by oneself that's worth internalizing and using as a baseline to depart from is the following:

1. **Frame the episode**. Make a clear, intentional decision about what work I'm sitting down to do: the subject, the goal, the duration and the nature of the work. For example: "I have 45 minutes left out of the hour I'd originally blocked. I'm going to develop an outline of the board deck, sketch out more detail to the extent I have time, and delegate out the parts that others can advance."

2. **Visualize**. Picture as vividly as possible how the episode should go, creating a mental map I can steer by as I work. For instance, in the example above: "Since it's important that I set others' work into motion now, while there's still lead time, as soon as I've developed the outline, I should reach out and frame assignments for team members. I think that Amy will be able to work on the sensitivity analysis and Bob on the slides framing strategic options. I should start by reviewing my notes from the last board call, and the last few emails from the founder. Then I probably need about 15 minutes to sketch out the essence of the board deck, after which I'll write detailed enough emails to Amy and Bob that they can get started. If there's time after, I'll write some notes to myself for when I have more time to work on the parts of the deck I'm going to write."

Part of what this visualization does is break the episode up into a set of distinct chunks, making the work easier to navigate. In this example, if the first chunk, re-grounding myself in the context of the

meeting, takes more than a handful minutes, then the overall visualization is off—which is important to recognize quickly. If the meeting required deeper reflection, a different visualization would be appropriate, perhaps beginning with a step back to assess where we are in terms of our overall goals and plans with the venture, perhaps rereading and marking up an earlier planning document, and only then taking in the inputs most relevant to the specifics of the upcoming board meeting.

3. **Weave together immersion and "stepping above**." Having a clear visualization enables a pattern of engagement that moves between immersion in each chunk of work and quick "beats" of reflection reconnecting back to one's mental map for the whole episode. To continue with the example, I might realize after rereading the founder's recent emails that one of them would benefit from a thoughtful response, as there's a risk of a disconnect that should be resolved before the board meeting. At this point, there's a choice: (1) capture the need to write that response, then let it go and return to the next step I'd visualized, sketching out the board presentation; or (2) change what the episode's about, and instead of doing the work previously planned, write the email response to the founder.

In the absence of a vivid visualization, this choice doesn't stand out as clearly. My mind might be drawn to the need to respond, I'd use my 45 minutes to write the response, and I'd fail to delegate the work to Amy and Bob that would enable them to make progress while I'm busy with other things. I'd become the bottleneck without making a choice to operate that way. Perhaps writing the response is in fact urgent, in which case having the clear visualization enables me to draw an appropriate conclusion—like that I should ask for a call with Amy and Bob a few hours later while I'm in transit, so that I can at least verbally sketch out the work they each might do.

4. **Complete the episode**. Whether the episode has a fixed end time (e.g., "a couple of minutes before 10:00, to take a breath and then begin my ten o'clock meeting") or the end time is more flexible (e.g., take whatever amount of time is needed to get the outline finished), it is valuable to take a moment to mark completion. I mentally scan backward to reflect on what I've just done and forward to see if there are any future implications that flow from the completed episode. If I've decided to defer the email response to the founder, I might quickly note to myself that I should have internalized the need to respond when I first read the founder's original message, which feels like a pattern in a period when I've been triaging correspondence aggressively. I'm leaving the episode with a clear outline for the presentation, and I already have a check-in with Amy and Bob a couple of days out, so I now just note to myself that I'll need something like a 90-minute block after the Amy/Bob meeting to do the rest of my work on the deck. Perhaps I don't have time to figure out just when that will be, but it's on my list to return to when I next have a moment to stop and plan.

5. **Pause and orient**. One episode follows another, so there's a beat that should happen after completion: pausing for a moment, mentally transitioning, and then beginning this cycle again with whatever comes next.

This pattern can be used in very different ways, depending on the nature of the work. These five steps could equally apply to highly immersive work, like spending a whole morning on white space thinking about corporate strategy, or routine, transactional work like using a taxi ride back from the airport to process one's inbox. In the former case, "stepping above" might take the lofty form of asking questions like "am I opening my mind wide enough to consider a truly broad spectrum of

strategic options?" while in the latter case, stepping above likely comprises quick tactical checks, like making sure that I don't slip into writing an in-depth response to one email before I finish processing the whole batch that has accumulated in my inbox.

In our next post, we'll apply the same thinking to meetings—just as it is helpful to use this pattern in solo work, it's even more important when bringing multiple people together to work toward a shared visualization.