



CHAMBER MEMBER NEWS

Thinking Like an Executive

By: Dr. Roy Wood, Dean, NSU Broken Arrow

Before coming to Broken Arrow, I served in a number of executive-level jobs with the Department of Defense. The pace of meetings, commitments, and decisions required me to continually work on improving my productivity and time management. In the process, I discovered new techniques, workflows, and tools to help me do that. Since many of you are busy executives or entrepreneurs, I thought I would share some of my insights with you.

Decision-Making in the VUCA Environment

At the National War College, we were explored some of the reasons executives have to work on a different plane. Much of it is due to the environment in which that work is done – the VUCA environment. This environment is Volatile, rapidly changing and often unpredictable. It is Uncertain. There are almost always gaps in information you'd like to have to make a good decision. It is Complex and Ambiguous. Few things are as straightforward as they seem and often have second- or third-order unintended consequences. Decision-making in this environment can be difficult and stressful.

A good deal of neuroscience and behavioral science recently has shed light on how the brain works in stressful environments and from that we can take away some prescriptions for doing so more effectively ourselves. First, higher-order thinking, like planning and decision-making take place in the brain's neocortex. This portion of the brain uses a significant amount of energy and tires quickly. To get the most done with these limitations, use the time of day when your brain is at its best to schedule those higher-order tasks. For me, I do my best work in the morning, so I come in early and work on projects that require the most thinking and planning. I save the afternoons for meetings, reading, and other tasks that are less stressing. Also be aware that when energy is expended on the first task or decision, subsequent efforts may be more challenging. For this reason, don't schedule back-to-back commitments. Try to allow 15-30 minutes between tasks to let your brain rest and recover.

In a similar vein, you probably also recognize that short-term memory is very limited, and even more so when you are in a stressful situation. The easiest way to manage this limitation is to capture things like to-do items, appointments, ideas, and other thoughts on paper or in your computer or smartphone. Create a trusted system that will free your brain for having ideas, rather than storing them. Freeing up your brain from focusing on the mundane things will provide the opportunity to focus more fully on the hard work. I use David Allen's Getting Things Done (GTD) methodology as the basis for my own system. His book by the same name is an easy read and a good reference.

Long-term memory resides in a different part of the brain from the neocortex and has its own set of advantages and disadvantages. When information needs to be committed to long-term memory, practice and reinforcement (aka memorization) can help, but is frankly pretty boring and stressful. Long-term memory happens in the brain's limbic system which seems to be activated by images and emotions. So, rather than try to memorize lists or procedures, it is often helpful to create sketches, flowcharts, graphs, or diagrams to help visualize the information, making it easier both understand and recall. I also like to use "mindmaps" when brainstorming. Google this if you've never used them. They are simple, non-linear ways to associate information more naturally and in line with

the way your brain thinks. Mindmaps help you organize information and may spark new connections between ideas that you hadn't considered before.

Finally, recognize that the brain is constantly creating new internal connections between ideas and information bits even when you may not be consciously thinking about it. I've often had a difficult problem or decision that no amount of wrestling with could seem to unravel. Yet, later I experienced a flash of insight where a solution came to me without effort. Call this intuition or a "gut call." These unexpected insights occur when subconscious connections are made, usually at a time when we are most relaxed – in the shower, out for a walk, on a break, etc. So, it is often useful to take a longer break from working on a problem and let our subconscious brains mull over the issue. It doesn't always work, but when it does, it really is an "Aha!" moment.

Dr. Roy Wood has a doctorate in Organization and Management, as well as advanced degrees in engineering and business. He is the Dean of Northeastern State University Broken Arrow. Wood40@nsuok.edu.



*Dr. Roy Wood, Dean
NSU Broken Arrow
Wood40@nsuok.edu*