

EPISODE 134

Let It Incubate

The answer you are grinding for may not come from grinding harder. Charles Darwin did some of the most important thinking in history on a gravel path, and the brain agrees with him: the quiet state, Alpha, prepares the breakthrough, and the fast state, Gamma, delivers it. This episode gives you four steps to get into Alpha on purpose — and come back and execute.

KEY STRATEGIES & IDEAS

1. Alpha Is the Incubator

Your mind runs in different states, and they do different jobs. Beta is the hurried grind — fast, focused, good at grinding through a problem, and terrible at finding a new answer, because it keeps circling the same ground. Alpha is the quieter state: relaxed alertness, the executive filter loosened, the pressure down, ideas that were too far apart suddenly meeting. That is the incubator. The quiet state prepares the breakthrough, and the fast state, Gamma, delivers it.

2. The Quiet Came First

Researchers Mark Jung-Beeman and John Kounios tracked people solving problems that needed a sudden insight, and they found the pattern again and again: a quieting of Alpha first, and then a burst of Gamma about three hundred milliseconds before the person said they had the answer. The quiet came first. The burst came second. You cannot schedule the burst. You can only schedule the quiet, and trust the burst to follow.

3. Hints Only Land in Alpha

Amna Ghani and her colleagues ran an experiment where they gave people hints while solving word problems, and the hints only landed when the brain was already in that quieter Alpha state. Same hints, same problems. When Alpha was up, people solved more of them, and more of the solutions arrived as sudden insights. When it was down, the hints just bounced off.

4. Walk to Change the State

Steve Jobs said, in his biography by Walter Isaacson, that taking a long walk was his preferred way to have a serious conversation, and much of Apple's design thinking happened on foot, out on the campus. Researchers at Stanford found that walking lifts creative thinking by about sixty percent, and the lift lasts even after you sit back down. You do not need Darwin's thinking path. You need a door and a problem worth carrying.

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5. Block the Room

Warren Buffett's calendar is famously near-empty, and he spends most of his working hours reading and thinking, not reacting. The point is not to copy his calendar. The point is that thinking time is planned, not stolen. Put one thinking walk on your calendar this week, the way you would put a review on it. If it is not on the calendar, the hurried day will eat it.

The picture: Charles Darwin worked only a few hours a day in his study at Down House. Then, around midday, he walked — around and around a quarter-mile loop of gravel he had planted himself, a path his family called his thinking path. He counted his laps by kicking a small flint off a pile each time around, so he would not have to interrupt his thoughts to count. Much of his reasoning about evolution was worked out on that loop, one quiet lap at a time.

ACTION & REFLECTION STEPS

- [ ] **Step one — notice the grind.** Catch yourself in Beta. You are re-reading the same paragraph for the third time, or turning the same three options over in your head, or getting louder with yourself about a problem that is not moving. Name it. Say, I am grinding. Naming it is the door out of it, because you cannot leave a state you have not noticed you are in.

The grind I keep catching myself in:

What I say to name it:

- [ ] **Step two — change the state.** Move. Get up and walk. You do not need Darwin's thinking path. You need a door and a problem worth carrying.

My walk this week — when:

The problem I will carry, loosely:

- [ ] **Step three — let it idle.** Once you are walking, do not keep grinding on the problem at full speed. Let your attention go soft. Look around. Let the mind wander. The incubator needs time with the problem held loosely, not gripped tightly. That is when the far-apart ideas meet.

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What I will let go soft on this walk:

- [ ] **Step four — come back and execute.** The quiet state is not the finish. It is the preparation. When the answer arrives, bring it back to the desk and put it to work. Test it. Decide on it. An insight you never act on is just a pleasant walk. And a leader who never leaves the desk never gets the insight in the first place.

What arrived:

The decision I will make on it:

Think two levels up. — Maya & Marcus

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