How To Perform At Your Peak Every Day: 10 Tips For Working Smarter

By David Rock

It’s a common scenario for many of us.

You start the day with an idea of what you want to work on and accomplish by noon. But when you check your email in the morning, a number of other demands crowd in, instant messages begin popping up like a game of whack-a-mole, and people start dropping by for “a quick question” that will “only take a sec.” Suddenly, you realize an hour has vanished into meeting other people’s needs while your project has gone untouched. How do people ever get anything done nowadays?

At the start of the new year, you may be looking at making 2014 even better than last year or eyeing a promotion, raise or new job. If so, drop the idea of doing more, and instead focus on working smarter.

The key? Think about your thinking.

David Rock, director of the Neuroleadership Institute and author of Your Brain at Work: Strategies for Overcoming Distraction, Regaining Focus, and Working Smarter All Day Long, says, “It’s really easy to follow every train of thought and every email that comes along and get lost in every conversation. The most effective people are aware of their mental approach to every interaction.”

For example, he says, people who think about their thinking “apply the best possible thinking strategy — should you be detailed in this meeting, should you be much more strategic, should you be more collaborative and allow other people to engage?”

Here are his tips to help you manage email, be creative, handle meetings, manage your emotions and more.

1. Don’t check your email first thing

It’s been said before but so few people follow this rule, it bears repeating.

Decision-making is an energy-hungry task, and our tanks are full in the morning. For that reason, the way you start your day is crucial. “Unless you’re in the emergency services field, or the matter of an hour is really critical, the best rule for email is don’t check it first unless your job is literally checking and responding to emails,” says Rock. “As soon as you download your emails, your brain gets overwhelmed with information and ideas, and your personal objectives and goals start to slip out the window. Leave it as late as possible in the day, so you can get your own work done.” He advises you leave your emails to early afternoon, if you can.

And when you do tackle email, write your own sparingly. “Use emails to share information, to schedule, but never use emails to discuss complex issues or give any kind of feedback, particularly negative feedback,” says Rock. “When you notice yourself writing an email longer than one screen, it’s time to pick up the phone. You can save countless hours with that one rule,” he says.
2. Make your first task of the day prioritizing your top three goals

Because of the number of outside demands in our lives can be so overwhelming, it’s important to know how to prioritize them. “There are so many potential distractions and detailers that can take our attention, we need to be really clear about the most important things. As a rule of thumb, you can remember three ideas relatively well,” says Rock. For that reason, you should limit yourself to three goals for the year, for the quarter. With four, five or six goals, you’re less likely to be able to unconsciously scan the environment for opportunities and threats relevant to those goals. When you do finally check your email, remind yourself of those goals beforehand.

3. Conserve your decision-making energy at every opportunity

“Your ability to make great decisions is a limited resource,” writes Rock in Your Brain at Work. For that reason, it is essential to learn to say no to tasks not among your priorities. “This means not thinking when you don’t have to, becoming disciplined about not paying attention to non-urgent tasks unless, or until, it’s truly essential that you do,” he writes. For instance, turn off your smartphone during a meeting instead of idly checking it to see what emails have come in — save it for later, when you know you’ll be able to respond. Additionally, don’t expend energy thinking about a project until you have all the information you need. And delegate.

4. Find and protect your quality thinking time

In his work, Rock has asked many people how much quality thinking time, which he defines as “time when you’re able to focus deeply and achieve what you set out to achieve in the time you expect,” they get in a week. “The number continues to decrease as I ask people. It’s not 20 or 10 or even 5 hours. For a lot of people it’s a couple hours a week, if that.” The culprit he says is our connected world. The solution: “Find the ideal window in your week when you can carve out focus time — to do what I call level three thinking, deeper problem solving and writing and creative work.” For everyone, this will be individual, but Rock says that generally, the best time is early in the day and early in the week — Monday, Tuesday, maybe Wednesday morning.

During this time, turn off all distractions — email alerts, your phone ringer, etc.

5. Reserve meetings for your low-focus time

As you find the time when your brain is most able to do level three thinking, you may also identify times when your energy ebbs. That could be the best time for you to have meetings, “when you don’t necessarily have to be at your peak,” says Rock. (Positive psychology researcher Shawn Achor also says that our energy wanes as sugar levels drop, so, for some people, the period after meals could be a good time to reserve for more complex thinking.)

6. Don’t waste precious energy multitasking. Single-task as much as you can

Our brains can only do one conscious thing at a time, and switching between tasks not only wastes energy, but multitasking can leads to decreased performance and more mistakes. And, it saves no time at all. Multitasking between two activities takes the same amount of time as it does to do them one at a time. If you have two things that need to get done as soon as possible and as accurately as possible, do one first and then the other.

7. At the beginning of each meeting, decide where you want to be by the end and the most effective way to get there

“Conversations tend to expand to fill the time available,” says Rock, “and it’s really helpful to spend a minute or two upfront with every meeting asking a simple important question: where do we want to be at the end of this meeting, and what’s the most effective way to get there?”
In a meeting, there are five types of thinking you can do, which Rock describes as “vision, planning, detail, problem and drama.” “We don’t do a lot of vision thinking even in an average meeting,” says Rock. “We don’t say, ‘Why are we doing this? What are we trying to achieve? Where are we trying to get to?’ But it’s very important to have that vision thinking done, not just to motivate thinking and allow creativity but to guide the next processes.”

Planning and detail thinking are both about “how” to implement your vision, with planning being more abstract, and detail being more specific, but these kinds of thinking can only be done once the vision is set. “This kind of ‘how’ thinking is very difficult if you don’t have a very clear what,” says Rock.

“Most meetings start with detail, and then it’s easy to devolve into problem and drama, says Rock. “So start with vision as much as you can, even if just two or three minutes, and work out a clear plan for the meeting itself, and do all that before you start getting into details.”

8. Learn to maintain a positive state of mind

Learn to stay in a “toward state” or a positive mindset. “The brain classifies everything as threat or reward — we’re always staying away from threat or moving toward reward. It’s fine to put out fires and do busy work that’s solving problems, but we generally do better thinking when we’re creative and collaborate better when we’re in a more positive state and moving toward something, toward a goal, and minimizing stress and threat responses,” says Rock. For instance, he says, your brain is in a toward state when you receive an email from a friend, but if you get a negative email from your boss about something that’s gone badly, you’ll be in a threat state.

To stay in a toward state, identify how you feel, says Rock. “Studies show that putting words on your emotions helps you reduce those emotions.” Then, reinterpret events. If a tough project comes your way, and you become anxious, don’t think about this as a potential threat but as an opportunity to show people what you’re made of. “As you change your interpretation, you change your whole mental state,” says Rock.

9. Carve out down time

“It’s really helpful to allow your brain to rest,” says Rock. “Have some down time and you’ll find you’ll get a lot more insights into your mind. Switch off your devices when you’re in transit. Don’t turn your devices on first thing in the morning and have regular blocks of time where your brain is just resting. You’ll find a lot more insights coming through.”

And sometimes, the rest should be literal. “Napping has been shown to be very helpful for creativity,” says Rock. “A 10-20 minute nap in the afternoon when you’re low is helpful for being more creative and more productive for the rest of the day. Studies show if you had a bad night’s sleep, having a nap like that can get you almost back to the level you need — the level you would have if you had slept well.”

10. Celebrate small wins

We all are so busy and our minds so problem-focused, we tend to rush from one thing to the next and miss the progress we are making. “Yet a sense of progress has been shown to be one of the most rewarding and engaging experiences at work,” says Rock. “Take time out regularly — weekly or monthly is ideal — to celebrate the wins and the progress you have made on your goals. Positive emotions are helpful on many levels, including improving immune function and making us more creative.”

One tip: Make a “good things jar” and whenever you have something to celebrate, write about it on a slip of paper and put it in the jar, to read them all at the end of the year.