

## A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention

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That’s what Herbert Simon, who won a Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, proved after extensive research in organizational behavior.

Think about it. How many times have you ever been tempted to click out of an email when the sender wrote paragraph upon paragraph upon paragraph of facts and figures, leaving you rubbing your eyes and fighting off yawns. Or how many times on social media have you skipped past posts because they wrote a book instead of a comment?

If you are aspiring to be an effective leader, your attention at precise times is key to understanding people, things, situations, and surroundings. You must guard against getting weighed down with too much information.

The French emperor and military commander Napoleon Bonaparte had his secretary wait three weeks before opening any correspondence. When he finally did hear what was in a letter, he loved to note how many supposedly “important” issues resolved themselves and no longer needed a reply. This didn’t mean he was negligent in his duties or out of touch with his government, he was simply being selective about who and what kind of information got access to his brain.

The point is, it’s very difficult to think or act clearly when we are drowning in information. It’s why lawyers attempt to bury the other side in paper. It’s why

intelligence operatives flood the enemy with propaganda, so they have a hard time figuring out the truth. The goal of these tactics is often referred to as *analysis paralysis*.

When Dwight D. Eisenhower was a military general and struggled to manage the torrent of facts and fiction that was thrown at him, his solution was strict adherence to the chain of command when it came to information. No one was to hand him unopened mail or just throw half-explored problems at him. Out of his habits of managing information came the “Eisenhower Box,” a matrix that assigns priorities by their ratio of urgency and importance. Eisenhower would tell those around him that much of what was happening in the world or on the job was urgent but not important or important but not urgent. Categorizing his inputs helped him organize his staff around what was important versus what seemed urgent, allowed them to be strategic rather than reactive, a mile deep on what mattered rather than an inch deep on too many things.

The first thing great chiefs of staff do is limit the amount of people who have access to the boss. They become gatekeepers: no more drop-ins, tidbits, and stray reports--so the boss can see the big picture--so the boss has time and room to think. If the boss doesn’t have time and room to think, then who does?

In his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius says, “Ask yourself at every moment, ‘Is

this necessary?’” If someone is bringing you information to make a decision, is the decision even necessary? And could someone else have made the decision? You must know what NOT to think about, what to ignore, and what NOT to do. It’s your first and most important job.

There’s a great saying: *Garbage in, garbage out*. If you want good output, you have to watch over the inputs.

It isn’t easy. It takes tremendous discipline. This means fewer alerts and notifications. It means silencing and/or blocking texts. It means funneling emails to subfolders. It means reevaluating the “open door” policy. It means pushing away selfish people who bring needless drama into your life. It means studying the world more philosophically--that is, with a long-term perspective--rather than following events second by second.

The way you feel during the time of day when your mind is fresh and unsoiled by the noise of the outside world--that’s the space worth protecting. That’s the time that no one should be bothering you unless the third world war started. So too is the zone you lock into when you’re really working well. Don’t let intrusions bounce you out of it. Put up barriers. Set up routes to direct what’s urgent and unimportant to the right people.

Today’s world is challenging enough without buckets of information being poured over your head. If you let it, the information super highway will lead you right over a cliff.

~ The End ~