

THE

DISTRACTION

SLAYER



5 MASTER TACTICS TO ELIMINATE
INTERRUPTIONS ONCE AND FOR ALL

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INTRODUCTION

Many people have heard the phrase Gordian Knot, but few folks actually know what it means or the legend behind it. The Oxford Living Dictionary calls it “an extremely difficult or involved problem.” But before it was a metaphor it was an actual set of knots so tangled up one Roman historian said, “it was impossible to see how they were fastened.”

Alexander the Great encountered this tangle of knots tied to a yoke in the city of Gordium, in what is modern Turkey. The year was 333 BC. According to a prophecy, the man who could untangle the knots would become a great conqueror.

Because of that prophecy, Alexander was determined to untie the knots. He kept at it for a while. He tugged at them with no luck, so much that his fingers were rubbed raw. Finally, he had his “aha!” moment.

Alexander stopped tugging and stepped back from the tangle. He said, “It makes no difference how they are loosed!” and cut through all of the knots with a single powerful sword stroke. That’s where we got the phrase “cutting the Gordian knot”

for solving a seemingly impossible problem. Alexander went on to conquer Egypt and much of the known world before his early death.

Greatness beckoned, but not until he overcame the challenge. To solve the problem of the Gordian Knot Alexander needed a determination and a singular focus we often struggle to find today.

Tangled Up in Distractions

A modern Alexander might consider the knot for a fleeting moment but then get sidetracked by email, social media, texts, meetings, people popping through his door to pick his brain, smartphone updates, phone calls, reports and spreadsheets, breaking news. . . . The list is endless, right?

Pretty soon, the workday is over, and he goes home hoping to get untangled the next day. And the next. And the next. But he never does solve it. Dealing with all the immediate problems and distractions prevents him from the decisive stroke that cuts through to what really matters. He goes down in history not as Alexander the Great but as Alex the Easily Distracted.

For many of us distractions have become a permanent complex tangle, constantly standing between us and what we want to achieve.

If this tangle describes your work, what you need a sword and the confidence to swing it. Here it is: The Distraction Slayer.

The five master tactics I detail here don't necessarily involve the hard work of breaking ingrained habits. But they will enable you to slice through the tangle and finally get accomplish what matters most in your business.

1

DISCONNECT FROM YOUR DEVICES— ALL OF THEM

I think technology is great. It has enabled us to do things that our ancestors couldn't even dream of—from moonwalks to laser surgery to keeping in touch with high school friends spread out all over the globe.

But our tech also presents untold distractions that can murder your productivity. That's not an exaggeration. A study by the University of California at Irvine found office workers took about 25 minutes to refocus after being disrupted by an incoming phone call or email. A few interruptions like that, and you can lose hours every day.

30 Minutes for a 30-Second Task

Consider the case of someone I'll call Frank. He was trying to change a simple template to send his client an invoice. All he had to do was change two dates, the invoice number, and verify the amount. It should have taken 30 seconds, a minute tops.

As he told me, a call came in while he was updating the invoice. With this focus broken, he checked Facebook instead of returning to the invoice. Then Twitter. Then Amazon—and other points on the web that seemed to “suck me right in.”

By the time he tore himself away from all the distractions to edit and send the invoice, he lost more than thirty minutes. “And it’s a minor miracle I didn’t screw up even that simple invoice up!” he said after I shared with him the results of another academic study.

The University of London found a marked drop in the quality of work following a disruption. “Workers distracted by email and phone calls suffer a fall in IQ more than twice that found in marijuana smokers,” researchers found. No wonder it feels like we’re in a daze sometimes.

Another study commissioned by Adobe, with results that may be exaggerated but that are still worrying, found American office employees spend an average of 6.3 hours a day checking email.

How are we supposed to get any work done of any quality if we spend so much time constantly checking and answering emails? The answer often is, we don’t. And the work we manage to get done under these pressures is often not our best.

Bear in mind these studies only cover phone calls and emails. Every year the technological distractions multiply, with an ever growing number of updates and alerts on our smartphones and social media networks, watches, and who knows what else. It’s all now, all urgent, always screaming for our attention.

The Power of Disconnection

The master tactic here is not to turn our backs on technology. Rather, we should put ourselves in the driver’s seat and steer clear of distractions by disconnecting. In some cases that means using technology to fight the overreach of technology

into our work lives— overreach which can also have horrible consequences for our non-work lives.

As a long-time executive and entrepreneur, let me tell you: Constantly check email and social media is a focus killer. Every time you break your train of thought to do it, it's like you're adding another knot to the distraction tangle.

There are two primary ways to disconnect and avoid this problem. The first is to intentionally schedule a few times during the day to handle communications: answering email, checking social media, catching up on Slack, and so on. Respond in the time you have set aside, and otherwise close email, Slack, Instant Messenger, and whatever other apps ping, ding, and chirp.

The second way to disconnect is to use technology to manage technology. I use an app called Freedom. It works with Mac and PCs and blocks access to any site you want for a designated period of time. You enter in the number of minutes you want to be cut off from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and all the rest. Customization is easy. You can access sites you need for work and block all the rest.

You should have no fear in disconnecting, so long as your team understands what you are doing, and why. We'll turn to that now.

2

SET A BODYGUARD FOR YOUR FOCUS

“In wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies,” Britain’s most famous prime minister once admitted. And Winston Churchill would know!

Some people take his statement as mere wit or even cynicism. But it’s really a big part of how the Allies beat Nazi Germany in World War II. British code breakers used primitive computers to hack complicated German ciphers in a project dramatized in the movie *The Imitation Game*. This gave them access to vital information about ship and troop movements and other important information that was very useful for winning the war.

At the same time as the Allies were intercepting signals, they employed elaborate ruses to throw the Nazis off, including building and setting up hundreds of fake tanks to confuse enemy intelligence about where they might finally invade the continent. The D-Day invasion at Normandy, France, was successful because the Nazis didn’t expect it there.

Block Time to Focus

Adapting Churchill's phrase, our focus needs a bodyguard. Focus is the thing that allows entrepreneurs, executives, and other leaders to solve big problems. Without focus they can't access the sort of breakthrough thinking that leads to leapfrog innovation and advances.

Constant interruptions will try to rob you of that. I say this from experience as a mentor. Leaders constantly tell me they have a hard time breaking free of the distractions to get clarity about what they need to do next. If they can't find it, their organizations suffer from drift and indecision, with half-baked plans and short-term obsessions by workers who lack strategic direction.

The answer is to let your calendar be the bodyguard for your focus. You not only want to schedule blocks of time to address communication, you also want to schedule blocks of time for the kind of high-level, deep-dive work that will help you make progress on your most important goals.

You can do this in a few hours each day, but I actually recommend blocking whole days for this if you can—at least a couple a week if possible. Consider it an appointment with yourself. Mark the time on your calendar as busy or unavailable and let others know that you have the time committed.

What if an employee or colleague pops his head in the door and blows your concentration?

We'll address him next.

3

PRACTICE THE SOMETIMES CLOSED- DOOR POLICY

Many leaders easily wrap their heads around the benefits of swatting away distractions caused by technology, but they also want to practice an open-door policy where people can interrupt at almost any time.

I think this is an overreaction. We all have experience with distant or aloof bosses. You know the type. He locks himself away in his office and doesn't want to be disturbed for anything. He only takes interest in his team if they disturb him. And he deals with their issues the same way a grizzly bear would—by growling.

We don't want to be that guy, so we overcompensate.

We practice an open-door policy. We either leave the door physically ajar or let our people know that they can come right in any time. And so they do.

Sometimes they just ask how things are going. Other times, they pop their heads in the door to pick our brain or bounce problems off of us. They rope us into unplanned conversations and full-on meetings that can devour hours of productive time.

Almost all of these interruptions are well meaning. But distractions are distractions, whether they come from technology or from our colleagues. Think of it this way: They are keeping us from productive work, reducing the quality of the work we can manage to finish, and upping our frustration at the same time they destroy our focus. And we invited them to do it.

Office Hours

There's a reason college professors keep office hours. They need to be available to help students. But they can't afford to be available all the time if they are going to do serious scholarship. Neither can you.

To strike the right balance, you need to practice the Sometimes Closed-Door Policy. Just like you schedule time when you're unavailable, as we discussed in Master Tactic 2, you also need to schedule time when you are available. This allows for windows during the day when people can get the problem-solving, feedback, answers, and approvals they need from you.

The Sometimes Closed-Door Policy can have all kinds of beneficial effects for both you and your team. When face time is limited, we make better use of it.

However, because it's not a policy we're used to following, it can be a little hard to implement. Upfront communication with your team is important. Let them know in advance when you're available and when you're not.

During your designated open times, team members will come to you with the usual difficulties and problems. Some actually need your help for a solution, but some definitely don't. Taking time to solve people's problems can be helpful, but it's not always the best and highest use of your time. We'll look at this challenge in the next section.

4

BECOME A NO NINJA

Steve Jobs had innovation practically oozing out of his pores. He gave us elegant, easy-to-use personal computers, changed our expectations of communication and personal devices, transformed the way we consume media, and revolutionized animated movies almost as an afterthought.

What was his secret? Apple's co-founder explained at a developers conference in 1997, "People think focus means saying yes to the thing you've got to focus on. But that's not what it means at all." Rather, getting breakthrough focus means "saying 'no' to the hundred other good ideas that there are."

"You have to pick carefully," Jobs cautioned. In fact, he said that he was "actually as proud of the things we haven't done as the things I have done. Innovation means saying 'no' to 1,000 things."

Jobs was a no ninja. Keep his example in mind as your team comes to you with their problem, issues, and crises. One of the people you're going to have to say no to the most is yourself. When your team comes to you with a problem, you have several instincts telling you to help them: you want to help, you might enjoy

it, and so on. But every yes is an obligation, and too many obligations is an obstacle.

Yes or No in 3 Questions

To become a no ninja, is as simple as answering three questions. These questions will enable you to identify the instances where your yes really matters. Before tackling other people's problems, ask yourself:

1. **Is it important?** Remember that just because something is communicated to you in urgent tones doesn't mean it is actually important. And just because it registers as important to someone else doesn't mean it's automatically important to you. And so, the next question.
2. **Is it important for *you* to do it?** Really think about this one. Pausing to decide if it lines up with your passion and proficiency is a good move. There may be someone else on the team who is better suited to tackle the problem. If so, delegate.
3. **Is it important right now?** Even granting that it is important and important for you, that doesn't mean it's important right now. You may be able to file it under the list of things to be done when you are doing more routine tasks.

Solving problems is a good thing. But trying to solve all of your team's problems isn't. That's why you have a team to begin with—to expand your capacity, not limit your focus. If there is something important, something that you cannot delegate, and something that has to get done right now, then see to it. If not, leave it for a more appropriate person or time.

If you struggle with this, it might come down to a leadership issue. Do you find an unhealthy amount of significance from solving team problems? Do you have the

right people on the team? Have you empowered them to act? It's critical to address these basic leadership questions as part of becoming a no ninja. If we don't, we'll never make the kind of progress possible with our most important projects and goals.

So, we've disconnected. We've blocked time to focus. We've set aside time to deal with team requests. And we've narrowed down the problems that truly need our attention. We're done, right? Not quite. There's one more master tactic, and it can be a challenge for some.

5

HIT THE PAUSE BUTTON ON WORK

Let me be direct on this one. To get the kind of focus needed to succeed, you have to work not more, but less.

Ambition is good. Hard work is good. Workaholism is a disease. And it infects millions. According to Gallup, the average American workweek is nearer 50 hours than 40. And for some of us, it's a lot more. One study found that professionals who carry mobile devices like smartphones engage with their work more than seventy hours a week!

Even if that figure exaggerates the problem, we all have experience with overworking. Even if we're not crouched over our laptops, we're still answering emails on nights and weekends, chewing up hours trying to stay ahead or get caught up.



CONCLUSION

In short, we're always on. And that is not a good thing. Research shows putting in extra hours for a short stretch is okay, but if it becomes the norm our productivity takes a dive.

We're not only getting less done, we're also burning ourselves out. And if we are burned out, we are going to be easily distracted and not even capable of the kind of focus this ebook is trying to help you protect.

So do yourself and your team a favor. Leave on time tonight, turn off your phone and your email, have dinner with friends or family and get a good night's sleep. Next, honor your weekends. Take a stand for Saturday and Sunday. Unplug and recharge. Then start Monday rejuvenated and ready to slay that distraction, once and for all.