

How zoning out can help you solve problems

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Have you ever had an 'A-ha' light bulb moment? Or shouted "EUREKA!" in a moment where it seems from out-of-the blue you suddenly solve a problem you had long ago stopped thinking about?

Chances are most of us has experienced this moment at least once in our lifetimes, and more than likely, we have all experienced it multiple times.

Have you ever wondered how you can make these eureka moments, and the wonderful ideas that come with it, come to the surface as needed? I mean how many times have you been stuck sitting there trying to ponder the solution to a problem from as many angles as consciously possible, only to come up with either the same solutions over and over again, or just nothing - and end up settling for what feels like less than the best solution.

I recently read an interesting article on problem solving, and how allowing our minds to completely wander away from the problem and onto other thoughts can often times help to generate the creativity found in these eureka moments - and I thought about how this could apply within product management.

In product management, we are constantly trying to solve problems for the market and come up with solutions – but sometimes that is hard to do, especially when the market is so competitive and innovation is an expectation. Sometimes it is hard to think creatively in the moment, when staring directly at the problem – and as a result, we are possibly missing out on identifying a more creative and innovation solution to the problem at-hand. There are many ways that we can approach problem solving to help us with creativity – we can analyze our market evidence further, brainstorm in a group, look to other products for ideas, even other markets, or sometimes just step away from the problem and take a break from it, hoping that a new session of problem solving will turn out better.

But studies actually show that just taking a break won't really help all that much – that just stepping away from the problem to clear our minds, is not really a way to come back more creative the next time, or produce more angles and more solutions.

What we really want to do: zone out. Which could be tricky because traditionally zoning out is really not that encouraged in the workplace. Sure, we have all sat and stared out the window just a little bit longer than we should, or got lost in a daydream before waking up suddenly with an inbox full of messages staring back at us – but to make it part of the regular workday? Well, wouldn't that be a nice thought – but the reality is, it probably won't be encouraged anytime soon.

But hey, maybe it should...

According to the article I read, a recent study asked a group of individuals to brainstorm as many solutions to a problem as possible within a given timeframe, and then the group was given a break with some participants told to do nothing on their break, some participants given a demanding focus-intensive activity to do, and the third group given an undemanding activity to elicit mind wandering, or 'zoning-out'. After the break was over, each group was once again asked to brainstorm solutions to both the original problem as well as additional new problems - the result? The group given the undemanding activity meant to elicit mind wandering, performed 41% better in providing solutions for the original problem, the other two groups did not improve at all. All three groups performed the same when tackling the new problems, meaning that letting yourself zone-out to generate more creative solutions, really only works once the problem is already inside your head.

So, with that thought in mind, maybe the next time you're stuck in a brainstorming session trying to solve the problems of your market, the real answer will not be to just step away from the problem to find a more creative solution – but to step away, relax and zone-out. Pack your bags, grab a snack, and take yourself on a journey through your own imagination, you just may be surprised at the creative gems you come back with.

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