

Episode #160: Five Reasons You Need White Space on Your Calendar



Full Episode Transcript

**With Your Host
Dr. Janel Anderson**

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Hello and welcome to another episode of the Working Conversations podcast where we talk all things leadership, business communication, and trends in organizational life. I'm your host, Dr. Janel Anderson.

I am so thrilled to have you join me today as we explore a topic that is so overlooked, but incredibly vital for leaders and staff in any organization. The importance of saving unscheduled time on your calendar. What I like to think of is whitespace.

In today's fast paced world, it is all too easy to get swept up in a whirlwind of meetings, leaving little time for reflection, creativity and strategic thinking. But what if I told you that carving out unscheduled time could be the key to unlocking your full potential?

Stick around as we uncover the reasons why saving time for the unscheduled is a game changer in today's work environment. Now, I hear from people all the time that they are scheduled in back to back meetings all day long. They barely have time for lunch, let alone going to the restroom. Now I know of some organizations who have implemented 25 minute meetings instead of 30 minute meetings or 50 or 55 minute meetings instead of one hour meetings. But what I'm talking about goes beyond that way beyond that.

I'm talking about big blank spaces in your calendar, on purpose, an hour or two at a time, a couple of times a week. Now I'll also make a plug for five minutes here and there. But I really want to see you carve out an hour or two a couple of times a week. So saving that unscheduled time on your calendar is crucial, especially for those of you who are inundated with that back to back meeting schedule all day long every day. Week after a week.

So let me give you some guidelines if you are an individual contributor, so a staff member, I want you to start carving out 10 to 15% of your work week so that if you're working a 40 hour work week equates to about four to six hours. So this could be a single hour per day, or it could be a couple of chunks of two, two and a half hours at a time.

Now if you are a manager that is you are supervising and managing the work of others. I want you to have even more time on your calendar. So 15 to 20% of your work week should be that whitespace on your calendar that's going to equate to about six to eight hours if again, you're working about a 40 hour workweek and if you are a senior leader, I want you to up that even higher to 20 to 25% of your workweek so that is eight to 10 hours, every single week of unscheduled time.

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Now let me get into why this is so important. And then I will explain exactly what some of the reasons are that you need to be doing this and how it's going to magically make a difference in your life.

Now why you need to do this. You need to do this so that you can tap into your own ideas so that you can be strategic so that you can be creative so that you can get even a little of your personal business done when it comes right down to it without that interfering with other things so that you're not also booking your dog's veterinary appointment at the same time that you're in a meeting, let's say.

So, we want to make sure that you've got that time set aside for you mostly be doing your business business, not your personal business. But we all know that there are some things that need to get done during business hours. So I'll give a nod to that a little bit later on. But let's look at specifically what the reasons are.

Now I could evangelize about this all day long, but I'm going to limit this podcast episode to just five reasons why carving out unscheduled time is essential. Now, I want you to know that I am talking to myself just as much as I am talking to you. Now as you think about your own career development, your own upward mobility in your organization for those of you who want to get promoted and move up the chain of command. And for those of you who are already in those senior leadership level positions, you need to handle disruption and handle those unexpected events.

So this is what you need to do, you need that whitespace on your calendar. This is going to help you stay at your personal best, whether that means peak productivity, or whether that means staying grounded and centered throughout the day or whether that means the time and space to be more creative and innovative. Now for those of you out there and I'm among you myself, if you are a people pleaser at any level whatsoever, it is going to be extra hard for you to set those boundaries and have whitespace on your calendar because somebody's going to come along and ask for that space if especially if they can see your calendar or if they can see you've got time scheduled with just yourself or even if they can't see your calendar and they make the plead to you that could you please find 30 minutes or an hour for them this week.

You will be tempted to dip into your whitespace I want you especially you to hold firm on your boundaries. Again I have five reasons queued up for you. And and I could talk for more. I could give you another five after this but I'm just gonna stick to these five, five excellent reasons why you need this whitespace on your calendar.

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So, the first one is reflection and strategic thinking. Without dedicated time to reflect and think strategically about the work that you're up to not only the deadlines that you might have today or this week, but also the bigger picture thinking that you need to do about what it is you're up to this quarter or this year, or just generally in your career. Now, leaders and staff members alike can easily get caught up in the day to day operations without considering that bigger picture.

So having a few moments each day and a few hours every week set aside to do that strategic thinking is really going to give you peace of mind and it's also going to help keep overwhelm at bay. If you've got those ideas that are swirling in your mind at three o'clock in the middle of the night and you are separating or thinking about them then if you've even taken five minutes at the end of every day to do a little bit of reflection about what got done today. What's still left to get done tomorrow.

And strategy - what's some of the bigger picture initiatives you're working on and how does today's work are tomorrow's work line up and stack up against those? That's going to give you at least a running start on it so that five to 10 minutes as you close down the workday is an essential piece of this reflection and strategic thinking. But it's not enough. Again this is where we need hours, not minutes on the calendar to do this broad level thinking.

So that kind of bigger picture unscheduled time is going to allow for contemplation on long term goals, innovative ideas, potential challenges. It's going to really give you a strategic leg up. It's going to give you the time to and we'll talk about this more in a moment but the time to really see what's coming and anticipate what's coming in a bigger way.

So I really want you to look and be fierce about finding that time for reflection and strategic thinking, again, at a minimum five to 10 minutes at the end of each workday and a chunk a larger chunk of time at some point during the week. It's really helpful if you can ritualize this, so maybe it's a Friday afternoon thing so maybe the last thing that you do on your Friday workday, is you have 90 minutes to two hours scheduled to just be really thinking about what's coming next. What is a big picture look like in your work these days, and carve out that again strategic thinking time for yourself. So that's number one.

Number two whitespace on your calendar promotes creativity and innovation. If you're like most people, you get your best ideas when you're doing something rote like driving or taking a shower or washing the dishes. Something that you do regularly. And that doesn't require a lot of mental bandwidth. So that's kind of the same idea of what we're

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looking for here in white space on your calendar in order to promote creativity and innovation.

It's when your brain has that downtime, that the good ideas, the creative ideas come. So creativity just absolutely thrives in these unstructured environments or somewhat structured environment like for example driving or commuting where you know the way and you don't have to think about the driving. That's when your brain gets that unstructured time.

But I want you to not just wait for a time when you're driving or count on getting your strokes of brilliance in the shower. Instead, I want you to structure that unscheduled time on your calendar for this purpose. So by freeing up time on your calendar, you create space for in your own brainstorming sessions with yourself: idea generation, exploring unconventional solutions to the problems you might be facing and just giving your brain some space to rest and breathe.

Now this can lead to breakthrough innovations and competitive advantages. Not just for you but for the whole organization. When you and your team start doing this, it can really magnify the impact that you're having on creativity and innovation because it's not just you doing it. Let's say there's five people on your team. It's you times five. So this can be just a really, really wonderful way for people to start tapping into their creativity and letting the good ideas flow. Okay, so that's number two, promoting creativity and innovation.

Number three is it absolutely enhances your focus and productivity when we are constantly jumping from one meeting to the next to the next to the next that can lead to burnout and decrease productivity. So that unscheduled time and again, I'm talking about more than just the five minutes per meeting and again I'm talking about more than just five minutes between meetings. I'm talking about big chunks of whitespace.

That unscheduled time, provides an opportunity for you to recharge for you to prioritize tasks and especially for you to do some deep dives into projects that require greater concentration and focus without the distractions of email and teams chat and slack and all the things that are vying for your attention all the time. So this is really a chance for you to work on tasks that require intense concentration and that allow you to delivery and that allow you to deliver high quality results in the work that you're doing.

Now, if you're using the Microsoft suite, such as Microsoft Outlook and teams, one of the fantastic new features that Microsoft has added is focused time. So focus time that tool will do some analysis of your regularly scheduled weekly calendar and suggest for you some focus times when you're not typically in other meetings. Now for those of you

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who are in back to back meetings all the time, poor outlook is not going to be able to come up with any suggested times for you. You are going to have to put some boundaries and some bumpers on your calendar yourself. But again, the tools are emerging to help you with this. It's that important that the enterprise wide tools like Microsoft products are helping you with this because again, it is that important.

So one of the great things to use that white space for on your calendar is focus time or working on those projects where you really need to do some deep concentration. Now, you might mark on your calendar, exactly what project you're going to be working on it still to me counts as whitespace.

Now you can't do that with all of your whitespace on your calendar. It can't all be earmarked for other things otherwise you won't have enough time for number five on the list, which is actually the most important one but we're jumping ahead of ourselves because we're still here on three with enhancing your focus and productivity. So that is number three, enhancing your focus and productivity by scheduling some whitespace on your calendar that you're going to use specifically for project work and you probably already know what those projects are that you need to be saving some time for.

Now, reason number four you need white space on your calendar is that it encourages healthy work life balance, and there's two ways that this is going to work in your favor for that healthy work life balance.

But first of all filling every minute of every workday. With meetings leaves you little room for personal time, and that can lead to stress and burnout and dissatisfaction. So by reserving some unscheduled time on your calendar, you can better balance your professional responsibilities with your business with your personal business and your family commitments, leading to improve overall wellbeing.

So on one hand, I'm talking about things like scheduling doctor's appointments or maybe even going to those doctor appointments but I wouldn't really call that whitespace and call more like the scheduling of the doctor appointments or parent teacher conferences or your dog's veterinary appointment, those kinds of things that need to be done during business hours or school hours.

When you've got some whitespace on your calendar, you can take a few moments without doing it in the middle of a meeting. You can get those things scheduled, and again, not be multitasking and if you've listened to the podcast for a while, you know my stance on multitasking it is not possible and it leads to poor poor outcomes.

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Now so that's one reason then taking a little bit of that whitespace to deal with some of that, again, personal business that sometimes just has to be done on the clock, if you will, during business hours. But on the other hand, like the second important reason here within encouraging healthy work life balance is that this and again this is the most strategic reason for work life balance on the other hand, and really the second reason for on the other hand, and the second part of healthy work life balance is this. You will be less exhausted at the end of the day.

No zoom fatigue because you haven't been in back to back meetings all day long. You will be less likely to have long to do lists that didn't get done. You will less likely be living in overwhelm all day long. And so then at the end of the day, as you transition from your work life to your personal life, you will have the energy, the interest, the resilience to address your after work hours, that part of your life with energy and zest rather than with the exhaustion that makes you want to binge watch NetFlix and call a pint of Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey a well balanced meal because there's a little bit of fruit in the ice cream.

We don't want that to be your after work life. We want you to be able to separate from your work and again if you need a reminder or refresher on this. I have talked on the podcast now not recently, but in some of the earlier episodes. I absolutely talked about the importance of having a ritual where you shut down your computer and for those of you who are working from home I am especially talking to you or if you have your work email on a mobile device I am also talking to you shut that stuff down. Put that stuff on Do Not Disturb or shut it down entirely so that your home life your personal life is indeed your personal life and your family time.

So reason number four, to schedule some whitespace on your calendar is it is going to encourage a healthy work life balance in two ways. One, you've got a little bit of time set aside to conduct some of that personal business that maybe done maybe needs to be done during working hours and number two, you leave your workday not so exhausted, not so stressed out. And that's going to help mitigate against burnout and it's going to help you enjoy your personal life so much more.

All right, And reason number five I saved the best for last as I often do the reason number five for saving some whitespace on your calendar is that it is going to give you flexibility for the unexpected. Now unexpected issues are inevitable in any workplace. And this is one of the cornerstones in my most popular keynote these days which is called expect the unexpected. How to future proof your work and life.

We are bombarded with things all the time that feel like they're coming out of left field

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more and more. There is more uncertainty, more ambiguity, more change more things coming at us faster than ever before. And when we have whitespace on our calendar, it gives us a chance to handle it to deal with it again without tipping into overwhelm. So having that unscheduled time on your calendar ensures that you especially if you're a leader, whether you're leading with a capital L leading huge teams, or whether you're leading with a lowercase L leading by example, to your peers, having that unscheduled time ensures that you are available to handle those unexpected situations properly, without disrupting the entire day and without disrupting all the other important priorities you have.

You know, I'm not necessarily talking about emergencies here. Although emergencies do come up and for some of you emergencies come up way more often than for others of you. So depending on your industry and your role. Sometimes emergencies are just the way things are gonna go so if you have a lot of emergencies in your world, then save even more whitespace on your calendar. But I'm not necessarily talking just about emergencies. I'm really more talking about seeing the unexpected coming because again when you have that time for reflection that time for strategy, that time for creativity and innovation, that is when you have your antennas up you are more receptive to what's happening in the world and looking for ways that that might be impacting your business, your role, your career.

If we are back to back meetings, quite frankly, mostly handling other people's priorities all day long. We don't have a chance at seeing anything unexpected until it hits us right in the face. So having some whitespace on your calendar really is like having a safety net in place. For those unforeseen events.

And again, I think that is the most critical the most important and it will set you up for leadership success. Again, whether that's leadership with a capital L or leadership with a lowercase L it will set you up for leadership success. in profound ways. So incorporating unscheduled time into your daily calendar is not just beneficial for individual leaders. It also sets a positive example for the entire organization. It sends a message that prioritizing your own work including strategic thinking and innovation and creativity and that unscheduled space, so you can deal with the unexpected. Again, it is essential for success in the long run.

Now I struggle with this just as much as the next person may be even more because I always want to be able to serve my clients. I always want to be available to colleagues and emerging speakers and other people in my world. And even if it feels like I have to drop everything in a minute to notice to be available to them. In my heart of hearts, I want to do that. But also, I know that I am not going to be able to bring my personal best

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to the keynote that I'm doing tomorrow, or to the project that I'm working on for next week or two, the consulting proposal that is due at the end of this week. I'm not going to be able to bring my personal best to those projects.

If I don't reserve some whitespace on my own calendar so that I have time to marinate and digest and think and be creative and innovative and come up with a very best to serve my clients. So I need to double down on this just as much as you do. I definitely need to drink my own kool aid on this one. I do but part of my delivering this episode at this time is because I am in the middle of a very very busy year 2024 has been off the rails busy for me in a good way I'm not complaining.

And in those times it is harder than ever for me to carve out the whitespace so I'm talking to myself, my friends just as much as I'm talking to you. So as a quick refresh my top five reasons for keeping whitespace on your calendar are number one strategic thinking. Number two creativity and innovation number three, focus and productivity. Number four, work life balance and not being exhausted at the end of your day. And number five, the very most important one, flexibility for the unexpected. And that is a wrap for today's episode of the working conversations podcast.

I hope you found our discussion on the importance of saving unscheduled time that whitespace on your calendar, both enlightening and inspiring.

Remember, in the midst of endless meetings and busy schedules, it is crucial to prioritize moments of reflection creativity flexibility, and most importantly time to expect the unexpected.

Wherever you are on your career journey, protecting whitespace on your calendar is crucial. By embracing that unscheduled time on your calendar. You're not just investing in your own well being and productivity, but also again you are setting a powerful example for those around you.

So take a leap of faith if you must clear some space on your calendar and watch as new opportunities and insights unfold.

Remember, my friends the future of work is not only about technology, it's also about the values we uphold the communities we build and the sustainable growth we all strive for. We need to keep exploring, keep innovating and keep envisioning the remarkable possibilities that lie ahead.

As always, stay curious, stay informed and stay ahead of the curve. Tune in next week

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