

Mental Real Estate

Attention is the scarcest input in executive work. Here is how to spend it on thinking only you can do.

Every executive I know is short of the same thing, and it is not time. It is uninterrupted attention. The calendar can be defended. The head cannot, and most of what is stored in there is rent-free clutter: half-finished decisions, other people's open loops, and details that should live in a system.

Two modes do almost all the work. Wide aperture is where you see the whole picture at once, people, risk, money, technology, and adoption. Narrow focus is where you finish one consequential thing. Trouble comes from doing both at the same time, all day, which is how most of us work by default.

So I run a cycle. Widen, and look at the whole system on purpose. Choose the next piece that actually changes the outcome. Finish it. Record what I learned so I am not carrying it. Then widen again. Recording is the step people skip, and it is the one that frees the space.

AI earns its place by taking the work that consumes attention without requiring judgment. Research assembly. First drafts. Comparisons. Formatting. Test cases. Routine analysis. It is very good at all of it and none of it needs me.

What I keep is short and does not delegate. Purpose. Interpretation. Emotion and context. Relationships. Judgment. Accountability. If a task sits in that list, no tool touches it.

There is a second discipline that matters more than it sounds. Tell the team what changed. My AI chief of staff is only useful if it knows what I decided this morning, who I spoke to, and what is now off the table. A chief of staff working from last week's facts will confidently hand you the wrong answer, and it will be your fault, not the tool's.

The goal is not an empty head. It is a head holding only the things that require a person.

The rule: spend your attention on the thinking only you can do, and give everything else a home outside your head.