perspectives on leadership

Thought Leadership

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Abstract

Leadership and organisational change starts with thinking: thinking about problems, thinking about possibilities and thinking about capabilities. But thinking never occurs in a vacuum. Long gone are the days when a chief executive officer would disappear for weeks with a towel over their head only to reappear to announce 'the strategy' to the organisation. Thinking is of course a social activity that sees people coming together to develop and share ideas. The job of leadership is to exercise mastery over the process of social thinking in order to engage workers, to generate innovative ideas and to bring about change where needed. This paper considers the habits of social thinking, with reference to those found in the UK Civil Service, and proposes tools for leaders to significantly enhance their success.

Key words

leadership; thinking habits; change; innovation; engagement; Civil Service

An observational methodology

For many years I designed and directed leadership development programmes. These would typically involve weeks and sometimes months with participants taken from the top one per cent of executives across the public, private and NGO sector. The topics examined would cover the whole gamut of leadership: everything from self awareness and innovation; from governance to organisation development. I designed the curriculum for these programmes and, where needed, I would draw on experts according to the subject matter to deliver individual sessions and case studies. I can honestly say that these programmes were as thorough, demanding and deep as any other leadership intervention out there. Over time I realised that in front of me was an incredible resource comprising some of the most successful senior executives around. My interest in the curriculum was initially matched and then overtaken by an interest in the way that these leaders thought through issues together. Each time that a topic was introduced, a speaker presented, a live case study was tackled I observed and sought to make sense of the engagement and thinking habits of the 'great and the good'. Hundreds of hours of observational research helped to produce the book 'Thought Leadership: Moving Hearts and Minds' and the ideas that are set out in this paper.

Our most dominant thinking habits

The central thrust of the research revealed six habits of thinking that dominate interactions between people. These six habits account for the majority of our social thinking behaviour whether demonstrated by leaders or any gathering of individuals (see ***Figure 1***). They are observable and

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describable but remain largely invisible to those deploying them. Much in the same way that it is hard to fight in the trenches while at the same time viewing the whole battlefield, it is hard for people in the course of thinking conversations to easily see the patterns of thinking they are following. The first important step from a research perspective, and from the standpoint of leadership, is to bring these habits into view, to define them and to understand them. Critically, these habits lie at the heart of what leaders do which is to think and talk with others in order to lead organisational success.

Deficit thinking

Before exploring the thinking habits in turn I would like to tell a story that highlights perhaps our most dominant and persistent thinking habit, that of 'Deficit Thinking'. Deficit thinking is an orientation towards faults, flaws, weaknesses, problems, gaps, shortcomings, inconsistencies, errors, risks, difficulties and so on. The richness of words to describe this habit is only matched by the frequency and vigour with which we deploy it. I would defy anyone not to trip over this habit at least 10 times a day, every day.

I was once on a scuba diving holiday with my partner in a remote region famed for its exquisite corals and plankton blooms. We had set out in the morning by boat for a day's diving. The first dive went very well, in fact so well that afterwards, as I sunned myself on the top of the deck, my partner plunged back into the water to do some impromptu snorkelling. Like me she was an addict and didn't want to waste the time it took to decompress before the afternoon dive. The boat hadn't been moored and so the captain intermittently started the engine to take us away from the coral that grew close to the surface. The boat drifted towards it every now and then and, with the help of the engine, returned to its original site.

I distinctly remember lying on my back and feeling truly relaxed when I heard screams from down below. Something had happened and the boat's engine made some deep rumblings. Amid even more shrill screams, I jumped off the top deck to see my partner being lifted vertically out of the water by the burly, six-foot tall German captain. She had been hit by the boat's propeller as it had drifted into the coral and the engine had been

Figure 1: Six dominant thinking habits

Dominant thinking habits	Description
Deficit thinking	Thinking that is orientated towards identifying and examining risks, shortcomings and weaknesses; the most frequently used thinking habit.
Rational thinking	Thinking that emphasises a logical, rational and objective mode of analysis.
Common sense thinking	The application of general principles often taken from related experience or borrowed from similar situations to bring help to a problem or challenge.
Binary thinking	Thinking that describes problems or possibilities as mutually exclusive options sitting at either end of a spectrum. Typically denoted by 'either', 'or' formulations.
Equity thinking	Thinking that uses the concept of even-handedness and equity as its overriding principle
Sticky thinking	In the course of conversation, thinking is developed as one person forms an association with the last point of view raised; thoughts stick to each other, often randomly, and shape the thinking process

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started without warning. The propeller had cut through her wetsuit and deep into her leg leaving lacerations about nine inches long or more. It was horrifying and there were other large wounds elsewhere on her legs.

We frantically called a speedboat to take us to the shore; it collected us and, as it arrived on the mainland, we found ourselves in a makeshift ambulance that trundled to the hospital, each moment costing us valuable time. We arrived at the hospital and my partner was immediately ushered onto another makeshift piece of equipment, this time an operating table. At this point we found ourselves, despite the shock and the ever-growing seriousness of the situation, demanding that we saw all the implements that were to be used. We questioned every step of the process, 'Is he a trained surgeon?' 'Are those needles clean?' (They weren't, and we asked them to be changed which they did politely.) 'Are you sure those scalpels are clean?' (Some weren't which were also changed.) The repair work conducted by the doctors was, in the event, excellent. The less than sterile nature of some of the equipment was a serious concern but we believe we managed to track down all of the offending items having them replaced. My partner fully recovered although the ordeal wasn't over as we encountered numerous difficulties negotiating with airlines for them to provide sufficient seat space to take my partner home with her leg sticking out at right angles. But that's another story.

The outcome, given the circumstances, was a good one. Along the way however it was deficit thinking, the orientation of thinking towards risks, errors, faults, weaknesses and so on that lead to the identification of risks in the cleanliness of the equipment used. In this instance and in light of the extreme humidity in the country, it may have made the difference between life and death (or at least serious illness). Deficit thinking is well used and very powerful. It is good.

However, not every situation is suitable for deficit thinking wherein the wider challenge lies for leaders. There is no doubt that we grossly overuse this style of thinking and almost every time that a thinking conversation begins deficit thinking is first in the queue. One of the many complications in using the deficit model is in the impact on people when it is deployed. More often than not it leaves people feeling demoralised and disengaged, and from a leadership perspective, it is not only essential to be mindful of this, but it is a consequence that is ignored at some cost. The deficit model is so routine for us that it rarely occurs to us as being a thinking habit and we forget how destructive it can be. But more important than all of this is that we forget how little attention we are paying to solutions and providing help while we are demolishing the subject matter. There is a saying that *'if all you have is a hammer then all that you see are nails'*.

Rational thinking

Rational thinking, another dominant habit, refers to the logical, rational and objective side of our thinking. In business, rational thinking finds expression in cost-benefit analyses, in measurement, in return on investment calculations and in evaluations. It is objective, unemotional and reason(able). It is a style of thinking that, like deficit thinking, we apply without hesitation or for that matter without recognising that we are employing a style of thinking at all. The research encountered this habit on almost every occasion that problems or challenges were explored.

Rational thinking brings with it incredible strengths allowing complicated issues to be deconstructed and objectively viewed. It helps situations to be

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explained in terms of their causality and in terms of the relationships between different variables. It brings insight to the challenges we face and more besides. It is not the intention of this work to suggest that rational thinking is bad or wrong. It is however the conclusion of this work that rational thinking, just like deficit thinking, is insufficient in tackling the decisions we face and, importantly, it comes at a price.

I lead some work a number of years ago in examining the UK government's decision to sell billions of pounds sterling worth of its gold reserves and to reinvest the proceeds in a portfolio of currencies (US dollars, yen and Euros). At one level this was an investigation of the most effective method to sell large quantities of gold into the market so as to maximise revenue. From a different perspective, it came to be a study of the relationship that people had with the tangible security offered by gold bars and the symbolic significance of the decision to sell gold reserves. It evoked such a variety of deeply held views that the Times national newspaper was inundated with letters from appalled citizens who had made a significantly different risk assessment of the decision from the government. Citizens vehemently challenged the government's actions not because they didn't like the look of the numbers or the outcome of the cost-benefit analysis, but because of something altogether more emotive and 'irrational'. The answer to the 'so what?' question, is that considerable support, at least in the early stages, was lost for the government's decision at a fragile point in the process. Criticism from gold producing countries such as South Africa and South America came thick and fast as they feared this would trigger a major slump in the price of gold. This nervousness ricocheted across the international marketplace and prices went haywire for many months. The combined effect of these emotional as well as rational responses posed a major challenge to the sales programme and brought with it considerable variations in revenue in the order of tens of millions of dollars as a result. The rational wisdom of the decision to sell gold and the method used may have been undeniable but ignoring the human response to the issue came with a heavy cost. Perhaps if this had been attempted a second time around and more attention had been invested in bringing people with them, the government may have saved tens of millions of dollars.

This example illustrates three points. First, despite being a dominant thinking habit, rational thinking goes only some of the way to explaining how critical decisions are processed. Second, by writing emotions and feelings out of the script of decision-making we run the risk of ignoring some of the most important of our behavioural drivers. Third, and from a leadership perspective, in overemphasising a rational mode of enquiry leaders may fail to connect to the issues that workers and citizens care most about.

Common sense thinking

The practice of making decisions and offering ideas based on common sense is no stranger to any of us. It involves applying general principles often taken from related experiences or borrowed from similar situations to bring help to a problem or challenge. It is an approach that draws heavily on the rational model and, as with all of our habits, we rarely pause to think whether it is fit for purpose; whether in fact, common sense is good enough.

I do not wish to give the impression that popular perspectives are somehow lacking. The wonderful book 'The Wisdom of Crowds' by James Suroweiecki beautifully illuminates the value of common-thought. He starts his book with the

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popular TV quiz show 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire?' and, in reference to the 'ask the audience' option available to all contestants, he argues that where individual thought is pitted against group intelligence, the group will always win; the popular, commonly-held sense will always win through.

Within the UK Civil Service there has (perhaps up until very recently) been a deliberate policy of valuing common sense in its people and skills strategies. A workforce comprised of 'generalists' (also referred to as gifted amateurs), has been valuable to the civil service because it has for many years enabled staff to be deployed flexibly and it has helped to create a resource comprised of rounded individuals that can turn their hand to most things. Within the UK Civil Service it wouldn't be unusual for an employee to find themselves working in a policy area for a number of years, perhaps then moving role to be a private secretary or speech writer, and then some years later leading an HR directorate. This and other types of diverse career experience are commonplace and characterise the generalist approach to the people strategy of the civil service.

A challenge though to put to common sense thinking - a mode of interaction that is as commonplace as the title suggests - is that it is by definition a substitute for real expertise, insight and direct experience. Furthermore, what may sound like an appropriate analysis of a given problem derived from a common sense approach may simply be wrong; it may appear highly credible, it may receive general acceptance but it may just be incorrect. An example I would give relates to some consultancy work I provided for a public sector body that was introducing a talent management programme for its high flyers. Deliberately investing heavily in a small number of future stars was a bold step for the organisation and in some ways was counter-cultural. Nevertheless the management team pressed ahead with a well designed programme but paused momentarily on how best to communicate the new programme internally. After some discussion by the management team who, importantly had not had any prior direct experience of such a programme, the decision was taken to communicate this loud and proud – *'after all it may be counter-cultural but why act like we have something to hide?'* However, on advice, the top team waited for some benchmarking work on the communication strategies of similar organisations that had launched similar future leaders programmes. The data overwhelming supported a quiet, low key and measured communication plan, exactly the opposite of the common sense conclusion drawn by the top team. The consequences of the common sense approach looked set to cause significantly raised churn at levels in the organisation where departures could not easily be absorbed. The point here is not how to internally communicate new high potential programmes but that the management team and the leadership of the organisation were quite content to take a major decision based on little more than a lay judgement.

For leaders to lead thinking conversations where common sense, in place of expert judgement, is implicitly encouraged, do so at quite some risk.

Binary thinking

The word 'binary' describes a system that has only two possible options, normally represented by the digits 0 and 1. In electrical circuitry it is used to determine one of two states, either on or off. In computing it underpins the basic processing protocol. Importantly, the binary system does not allow for an in between state, and the selection of one of the two options available excludes the other

Figure 2: Illustrations of some binary thinking

Either	Or
Innovate	Be conservative
Centralize decision-making	Devolve decision-making
Drive change from the top	Build change from the bottom up
Value and reward individuals	Value and reward teams
Achieve quality	Drive down costs
Employ generalists	Employ specialists

from being possible. I use the principle of a binary system as a metaphor to explore another of our dominant thinking habits – binary thinking – which sees possibilities characterised as mutually exclusive options; as 'either…or'. Some examples are provided in ***Figure 2***.

Binary thinking helps to simplify problems and available possibilities. It helps to focus the mind and bring analysis down to a level that can easily be managed. It brings clarity where complexity and mess may prevail. For all these reasons it is a useful habit to adopt and there is nothing wrong with it.

The principle difficulty with it as a very regularly used analytical device is that there are few occasions when you cannot have both of the options presented. And even where it is literally impossible to have both, such as 'either keep the finance function in-house or contract it out', there is usually enormous value in using the challenge as a provocation to inspire creativity. In the clash between apparently inconsistent options, great ideas can be created and leaders should be interested in shaping and holding conversations that allow the space for ideas to be generated rather than limiting possibilities. The difficulty of course is that many leaders do not always recognise that binary thinking is in play and do not intervene to reframe the construction of the proposition so that it invites more possibilities.

From a leadership perspective, and in this age of new complex problems such as climate change, poverty, obesity and terrorism, we need innovative ideas more than ever. Successful leadership depends on the ability of leaders to inspire new thinking, and to generate more rather than fewer options. It relies on leaders to think the unthinkable: to deliver on 'both...and' rather than 'either...or'.

Equity thinking

Another commonly used thinking habit is equity thinking which is best described as a search for even-handedness and equity in a given challenge. It also emphasises the importance of consistency and often arises when two variables are compared. The principle of fairness closely associated with this habit is one that underpins the legal system, much of our political system, business relations, family and so on. It is a good and profoundly valuable style of thinking. However, as with our other habits it is deployed more often than not as an automatic reaction (to something that appears inequitable) and as such the habit itself remains unchallenged in conversation and the downsides remain unseen.

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An illustration of these issues is when I worked in organisation where, amongst other things, I had overall responsibility for approximately 200 accountancy trainees that would work and train with the organisation. They would each participate in a 40-month training program that would eventually lead them to chartered accountancy status with strong career prospects for the rest of their lives. It was a tough qualification and was fairly unrelenting in the frequency of exams and assessments. The organisation had clearly laid down policy on the various exam performances that students had to attain in order to progress to each stage and to stay in the employ of the organisation. Over the years, we had built data on the extent to which relatively poorer exam performances at early stages in the training program were predictive of final stage failure rates. After evaluating the position and reflecting on our existing policy and also consulting with other companies who trained accountants, we took the decision to raise the organisational pass rate by a few but significant notches for subsequent intakes of graduates.

This met with a barrage of complaints from trainees, their managers and their ‘counselling directors’ who forcibly challenged the decision on the grounds that it was inequitable to expect trainees studying only a year or more apart to be subject to different assessment regimes. Many managers and counselling directors had also passed through the system some years before and could sympathise with the stringency of the new arrangements. Inevitably, as students began to filter through the new regime, some students fell short by a couple of marks which, under the old policy, would have been sufficient for them to pass through the gateway to the next stage. In these cases, however, contracts were required to be terminated and again trainees, managers and counselling directors all put the case that it was an unfair system. Not only, though, were trainees and their supporters as one in the view that the system was unfair, but also their fellow students who had passed under the new regime held the same line. At times, the organisation had most of the 200 trainees disgruntled and opposed to the arrangement. Worst still, in a very buoyant marketplace where more than two thirds of trainees would leave the organisation within two years of qualification, the level of dissatisfaction borne from this sense of inequity threatened to strip the organisation of almost all its qualifying trainees, which had represented a heavy financial investment. Equity thinking, for all its strengths, threatened to severely damage the organisation.

Sticky thinking

The final dominant thinking habit is called sticky thinking. It is demonstrated when, in the course of conversation, ideas are developed as one person forms an association with the last point of view raised; thoughts stick to each other, often randomly, and shape the thinking process. It may not just be the last point that was raised that influences the next. It might be something particularly interesting that a speaker finds in a previous sentence or it might be an item on the news that day or any source of stickiness for a participant in a thinking process. While there can be enormous value in randomness as a trigger for creativity, sticky thinking also poses a serious obstacle to the task of marshalling thinking in a particular direction. From a leadership perspective where meetings are the most common engagement forum, too many meetings can wander off course leaving people disengaged and unclear of their purpose.

Thinking habits are unseen channels that shape our thinking

Whether we are talking about decisions in the boardroom or conversation at the dinner table, the

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way in which we think about challenges and problems is surprisingly similar regardless of the test that we face. We witness this every day although we may not fully register what is happening. It is perhaps easiest to picture what is going on as a raindrop winding its way down a windowpane. The raindrop represents the movement and direction of our thinking once a problem or conversation is explored. In every sense, the raindrop could take almost any route down the window were it not for two important factors. The first is gravity, which puts pressure on the raindrop to take the most direct route. The second is the path already taken by previous raindrops, which act as channels encouraging subsequent raindrops to follow the same route.

Our thinking is the same. We have a limited range of dominant thinking styles that we are pulled towards with almost gravitational force, and we find ourselves stuck in the channels of thinking already created, either by others in the course of conversation or through our own habits. One consequence is that unknowingly we have a limited repertoire of thinking styles that possess great problem-solving power, but on their own are entirely inadequate. Another is that if we wish to shift the way people think and in doing so to exercise leadership, we need to work at the roots of the thinking process: the unseen channels that shape our interactions. We need to find alternative patterns of thinking that can deliver value and find ways to jump out of our existing habits into these new channels.

A call for leaders to mobilise the shadow thinking styles

Hidden on the other side of each of our dominant thinking styles, at the opposite end of the axis, are six shadow thinking styles that possess considerable power for leaders. The trick for leaders is to recognise these and to utilise these lesser known styles to bring about greater engagement, innovation, energy and problem solving amongst workers. ***Figure 3*** identifies the shadow side styles with definitions and the words that typically trigger their use in conversation.

Figure 3: The shadow thinking styles

Dominant thinking habit	Shadow thinking style	Description of shadow habit	Trigger words for leaders
Deficit thinking	Strength-based thinking	Finding what works; what brings strength and value. Understanding the root causes of success and replicating them	'solution', 'success', 'value', 'what is working?'
Rational thinking	Feeling thinking	Emphasizing feelings, emotions, intuition and gut instinct	'feeling', 'gut instinct', 'sense'
Common sense thinking	Insight thinking	The application of expert knowledge and real direct experience	'expertise', 'experience', 'wisdom'
Binary thinking	Re-integrated thinking	Framing solutions that combine seemingly mutually exclusive options	'both…and…'
Equity thinking	360 degree thinking	Thinking that searches out multiple perspectives on a given issue	'stakeholders', 'perspectives', 'different views'
Sticky thinking	Exit thinking	Conversation is marshaled toward an explicit purpose (to the 'exit' of the interaction)	'focus', 'time available', 'by the time we leave'

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From a leadership standpoint it is the shadow thinking styles that deliver so many of the benefits missing in many organisations. For example, strength-based thinking, as a foil to deficit thinking, delivers considerably more energy, engagement and optimism to those that use it. It delivers a different quality of data that helps people better understand what they are doing well so that those strengths can be better leveraged and replicated. It is truly educational in this respect and consequently empowering for individuals who then start to understand and own their own contributions.

Feeling thinking, as opposed to rational thinking, connects to underlying emotions and the motivations found in workers and customers. A fascinating piece of research undertaken by IPSOS MORI (presented at the 2007 UK National School of Government's Public Service Reform Conference) highlighted what the public think of public services and at the top of the list of views and requests (including faster, better and more personalised services) was a call for 'more warmth' in the services provided. This priority requirement was thoroughly non-rational but right there at the top of the list and the leadership response is accordingly different from other 'rational' priorities.

Another example is re-integrated thinking which is the opposite to binary thinking. It forces people to consider the whole range of possibilities between the two binary extremes usually presented. But more than this it poses the powerful question 'could we have both?' which ignites incredible creativity and generates ideas like no other thinking style. This is a truly potent thinking style for leaders to wield.

The themes of creativity, engagement, energy, ideas and value runs through all of the shadow thinking styles. If you think about your own organisation and the leaders in it do you see more of the dominant or shadow thinking styles being displayed? Think specifically about the leaders and bosses you have had over the years and don't shy away from recalling how their leadership styles have made you feel. Typically organisations heavily emphasise the dominant thinking styles. While it is always dangerous to generalise, the dominant thinking habits are very much the norm for the UK Civil Service. Civil servants routinely deploy the deficit thinking habit in tandem with a rational thinking approach. The ability to identify flaws and risks is prized within the civil service and this is reflected in what is generally regarded as a risk-averse culture. The continued emphasis of generalists in workforce planning, recruitment and promotion underpins the use of common sense thinking. Similarly, the equity thinking habit is commonplace in organisations where the consistent and even-handed application of policy and strategy is a priority. These are not criticisms of the civil service but as part explanation for why the dominant thinking habits are so dominant.

Leading towards a broader range of thinking

The job of leadership is to shape the process of social thinking so that workers are engaged, so that that new ideas are delivered, so that new data is found to solve our biggest challenges. And as the next major change programme swings into action, leaders need to deploy thinking styles that inject energy and excitement into a change-weary workforce. It is this broad palette of thinking styles, incorporating the dominant and the shadow styles, which offers the solution to this conundrum. The skill, and it is a skill, is to naturally and seamlessly trigger new thinking, importantly to invoke the shadow styles, in business conversations. Unlike managers who have the tools of Gantt charts or decision trees, or like the surgeon who has her

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medical equipment or like the mechanic that has his tools, leaders have only their skills of communication to get their work done. Managers manage while leaders talk. Surgeons operate while leaders talk. Mechanics fix cars while leaders talk. Leaders need therefore to understand the twists and turns of thinking conversations. They need to understand the trajectory of the dominant thinking styles. They need to gain mastery over the language they use and they need to know how to trigger the deployment of the full range of thinking styles. No-one said leadership was easy but viewing it from the perspective outlined in this work can considerably improve the prospects of success.

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