

JOHN C.
MAXWELL
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HOW
SUCCESSFUL
PEOPLE
THINK

CHANGE YOUR THINKING, CHANGE YOUR LIFE

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Also by John C. Maxwell:

RUNNING WITH GIANTS

TODAY MATTERS

THINKING FOR A CHANGE

ETHICS 101

MAKE TODAY COUNT

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INTRODUCTION

Good thinkers are always in demand. A person who knows *how* may always have a job, but the person who knows *why* will always be his boss. Good thinkers solve problems, they never lack ideas that can build an organization, and they always have hope for a better future. Good thinkers rarely find themselves at the mercy of ruthless people who would take advantage of them or try to deceive them, people like Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler, who once boasted, “What luck for rulers that men do not think.” Those who develop the process of good thinking can rule themselves—even while under an oppressive ruler or in other difficult circumstances. In short, good thinkers are successful.

I’ve studied successful people for forty years, and though the diversity you find among them is astounding, I’ve found that they are all alike in one way: how they think! That is the one thing that separates successful people from unsuccessful ones. And here’s the good news. How successful people think can be learned. If you change your thinking, you can change your life!

WHY YOU SHOULD CHANGE YOUR THINKING

It's hard to overstate the value of changing your thinking. Good thinking can do many things for you: generate revenue, solve problems, and create opportunities. It can take you to a whole new level—personally and professionally. It really can change your life.

Consider some things you need to know about changing your thinking:

1. Changed Thinking Is Not Automatic

Sadly, a change in thinking doesn't happen on its own. Good ideas rarely go out and find someone. If you want to find a good idea, you must search for it. If you want to become a better thinker, you need to work at it—and once you begin to become a better thinker, the good ideas keep coming. In fact, the amount of good thinking you can do at any time depends primarily on the amount of good thinking you are already doing.

2. Changed Thinking Is Difficult

When you hear someone say, “Now this is just off the top of my head,” expect dandruff. The only people who believe thinking is easy are those who don’t habitually engage in it. Nobel Prize-winning physicist Albert Einstein, one of the best thinkers who ever lived, asserted, “Thinking is hard work; that’s why so few do it.” Because thinking is so difficult, you want to use anything you can to help you improve the process.

3. Changed Thinking Is Worth the Investment

Author Napoleon Hill observed, “More gold has been mined from the thoughts of man than has ever been taken from the earth.” When you take the time to learn how to change your thinking and become a better thinker, you are investing in yourself. Gold mines tap out. Stock markets crash. Real estate investments can go sour. But a human mind with the ability to think well is like a diamond mine that never runs out. It’s priceless.

HOW TO BECOME A BETTER THINKER

Do you want to master the process of good thinking? Do you want to be a better thinker tomorrow than you are today? Then you need to engage in an ongoing process that improves your thinking. I recommend you do the following:

1. Expose Yourself to Good Input

Good thinkers always prime the pump of ideas. They always look for things to get the thinking process started, because what you put in always impacts what comes out.

Read books, review trade magazines, listen to tapes, and spend time with good thinkers. And when something intrigues you—whether it's someone else's idea or the seed of an idea that you've come up with yourself—keep it in front of you. Put it in writing and keep it somewhere in your favorite thinking place to stimulate your thinking.

2. Expose Yourself to Good Thinkers

Spend time with the right people. As I worked on this section and bounced my ideas off of some key people (so that my thoughts would be stretched), I realized something about myself. All of the people in my life whom I consider to be close friends or colleagues are thinkers. Now, I love all people. I try to be kind to everyone I meet, and I desire to add value to as many people as I can through conferences, books, audio lessons, etc. But the people I seek out and choose to spend time with all challenge me with their thinking and their actions. They are constantly trying to grow and learn. That's true of my wife, Margaret, my close friends, and the executives who run my companies. Every one of them is a good thinker!

The writer of Proverbs observed that sharp people sharpen one another, just as iron sharpens iron. If you want to be a sharp thinker, be around sharp people.

3. Choose to Think Good Thoughts

To become a good thinker, you must become intentional about the thinking process. Regularly put yourself in the right place to think, shape, stretch, and land your thoughts. Make it a priority. Remember, thinking is a discipline.

Recently I had breakfast with Dan Cathy, the president of Chick-fil-A, a fast food chain headquartered in the Atlanta area. I told him that I was working on this book and I asked him if he made thinking time a high priority. Not only did he say yes, but he told me about what he calls his “thinking schedule.” It helps him to fight the hectic pace of life that discourages intentional thinking. Dan says he sets aside time just to think for half a day every two weeks, for one whole day every month, and for two or three full days every year. Dan explains, “This helps me ‘keep the main thing, the main thing,’ since I am so easily distracted.”

You may want to do something similar, or you can develop a schedule and method of your own. No matter what you choose to do, go to your thinking place, take paper and pen, and make sure you capture your ideas in writing.

4. Act on Your Good Thoughts

Ideas have a short shelf life. You must act on them before the expiration date. World War I flying ace Eddie Rickenbacker said it all when he remarked, “I can give you a six-word formula for success: Think things through—then follow through.”

5. Allow Your Emotions to Create Another Good Thought

To start the thinking process, you cannot rely on your feelings. In *Failing Forward*, I wrote that you can act your way into feeling long before you can feel your way into action. If you wait until you feel like doing something, you will likely never accomplish it. The same is true for thinking. You cannot wait until you *feel* like thinking to do it. However, I've found that once you engage in the process of good thinking, you can use your emotions to feed the process and create mental momentum.

Try it for yourself. After you go through the disciplined process of thinking and enjoy some success, allow yourself to savor the moment and try riding the mental energy of that success. If you're like me, it's likely to spur additional thoughts and productive ideas.

6. Repeat the Process

One good thought does not make a good life. The people who have one good thought and try to ride it for an entire career often end up unhappy or destitute. They are the one-hit wonders, the one-book authors, the one-message speakers, the one-time inventors who spend their life struggling to protect or promote their single idea. Success comes to those who have an entire mountain of gold that they continually mine, not those who find one nugget and try to live on it for fifty years. To become someone who can mine a lot of gold, you need to keep repeating the process of good thinking.

PUTTING YOURSELF IN THE RIGHTPLACE TO THINK

Becoming a good thinker isn't overly complicated. It's a discipline. If you do the six things I have outlined, you will set yourself up for a lifestyle of better thinking. But what do you do to come up with specific ideas on a day-to-day basis?

I want to teach you the process that I've used to discover and develop good thoughts. It's certainly not the only one that works, but it has worked well for me.

1. Find a Place to Think Your Thoughts

If you go to your designated place to think expecting to generate good thoughts, then eventually you will come up with some. Where is the best place to think? Everybody's different. Some people think best in the shower. Others, like my friend Dick Biggs, like to go to a park. For me, the best places to think are in my car, on planes, and in the spa. Ideas come to me in other places as well, such as when I'm in bed. (I keep a special lighted writing pad on my nightstand for such times.) I believe I often get thoughts because I make it a habit to frequently go to my thinking places. If you want to consistently generate ideas, you need to do the same thing. Find a place where you can think, and plan to capture your thoughts on paper so that you don't lose them. When I found a place to think my thoughts, my thoughts found a place in me.

2. Find a Place to Shape Your Thoughts

Rarely do ideas come fully formed and completely worked out. Most of the time, they need to be shaped until they have substance. As my friend Dan Reiland says, they have to “stand the test of clarity and questioning.” During the shaping time, you want to hold an idea up to strong scrutiny. Many times a thought that seemed outstanding late at night looks pretty silly in the light of day. Ask questions about your ideas. Fine tune them. One of the best ways to do that is to put your thoughts in writing. Professor, college president, and U.S. senator S. I. Hayakawa wrote, “Learning to write is learning to think. You don’t know anything clearly unless you can state it in writing.”

As you shape your thoughts, you find out whether an idea has potential. You learn what you have. You also learn some things about yourself. The shaping time thrills me because it embodies:

- **Humor:** The thoughts that don’t work often provide comic relief.
- **Humility:** The moments when I connect with God awe me.
- **Excitement:** I love to play out an idea mentally. (I call it “futuring” it.)
- **Creativity:** In these moments I am unhampered by reality.
- **Fulfillment:** God made me for this process; it uses my greatest gifts and gives me joy.
- **Honesty:** As I turn over an idea in my mind, I discover my true motives.
- **Passion:** When you shape a thought, you find out what you believe and what really counts.
- **Change:** Most of the changes I have made in my life resulted from thorough thinking on a subject.

You can shape your thoughts almost anywhere. Just find a place that works for you, where you will be able to write things down, focus your attention without interruptions, and ask questions about your ideas.

3. Find a Place to Stretch Your Thoughts

If you come upon great thoughts and spend time mentally shaping them, don't think you're done and can stop there. If you do, you will miss some of the most valuable aspects of the thinking process. You miss bringing others in and expanding ideas to their greatest potential.

Earlier in my life, I have to admit, I was often guilty of this error. I wanted to take an idea from seed thought to solution before sharing it with anyone, even the people it would most impact. I did this both at work and at home. But over the years, I have learned that you can go much farther with a team than you can go alone.

I've found a kind of formula that can help you stretch your thoughts. It says,

The Right **Thought** plus the Right **People**
in the Right **Environment** at the Right **Time**
for the Right **Reason** = the **Right Result**

This combination is hard to beat. Like every person, every thought has the potential to become something great. When you find a place to stretch your thoughts, you find that potential.

4. Find a Place to Land Your Thoughts

Author C. D. Jackson observes that “great ideas need landing gear as well as wings.” Any idea that remains only an idea doesn’t make a great impact. The real power of an idea comes when it goes from abstraction to application. Think about Einstein’s theory of relativity. When he published his theories in 1905 and 1916, they were merely profound ideas. Their real power came with the development of the nuclear reactor in 1942 and the nuclear bomb in 1945. When scientists developed and implemented Einstein’s ideas, the whole world changed.

Likewise, if you want your thoughts to make an impact, you need to land them with others so that they can someday be implemented. As you plan for the application phase of the thinking process, land your ideas first with...

- **Yourself:** Landing an idea with yourself will give you integrity. People will buy into an idea only after they buy into the leader who communicates it. Before teaching any lesson, I ask myself three questions: “Do I believe it? Do I live it? Do I believe others should live it?” If I can’t answer yes to all three questions, then I haven’t landed it.
- **Key Players:** Let’s face it, no idea will fly if the influencers don’t embrace it. After all, they are the people who carry thoughts from idea to implementation.
- **Those Most Affected:** Landing thoughts with the people on the firing line will give you great insight. Those closest to changes that occur as a result of a new idea can give you a “reality read.” And that’s important, because sometimes even when you’ve diligently completed the process of creating a thought, shaping it, and stretching it with other good thinkers, you can still miss the mark.

5. Find a Place to Fly Your Thoughts

French philosopher Henri-Louis Bergson, who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1927, asserted that a person should “think like a man of action—act like a man of thought.” What good is thinking if it has no application in real life? Thinking divorced from actions cannot be productive. Learning how to master the process of thinking well leads you to productive thinking. If you can develop the discipline of good thinking and turn it into a lifetime habit, then you will be successful and productive all of your life. Once you’ve created, shaped, stretched, and landed your thoughts, then flying them can be fun and easy.

PORTRAIT OF A GOOD THINKER

You often hear someone say that a colleague or friend is a “good thinker,” but that phrase means something different to everyone. To one person it may mean having a high IQ, while to another it could mean knowing a bunch of trivia or being able to figure out whodunit when reading a mystery novel. I believe that good thinking isn’t just one thing. It consists of several specific thinking skills. Becoming a good thinker means developing those skills to the best of your ability.

It doesn’t matter whether you were born rich or poor. It doesn’t matter if you have a third grade education or possess a Ph.D. It doesn’t matter if you suffer from multiple disabilities or you’re the picture of health. No matter what your circumstances, you can learn to be a good thinker. All you must do is be willing to engage in the process every day.

In *Built to Last*, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras describe what it means to be a visionary company, the kind of company that epitomizes the pinnacle of American business. They describe those companies this way: ¹

A visionary company is like a great work of art. Think of Michelangelo’s scenes from Genesis on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or his statue of David. Think of a great and enduring novel like *Huckleberry Finn* or *Crime and Punishment*. Think of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony or Shakespeare’s *Henry V*. Think of a beautifully designed building, like the masterpieces of Frank Lloyd Wright or Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. You can’t point to any one single item that makes the whole thing work; it’s the entire work—all the pieces working together to create an overall effect—that leads to enduring greatness.

Good thinking is similar. You need all the thinking “pieces” to become the kind of person who can achieve great things. Those pieces include the following eleven skills:

- Seeing the Wisdom of Big-Picture Thinking
- Unleashing the Potential of Focused Thinking
- Discovering the Joy of Creative Thinking
- Recognizing the Importance of Realistic Thinking
- Releasing the Power of Strategic Thinking
- Feeling the Energy of Possibility Thinking
- Embracing the Lessons of Reflective Thinking
- Questioning the Acceptance of Popular Thinking
- Encouraging the Participation of Shared Thinking
- Experiencing the Satisfaction of Unselfish Thinking
- Enjoying the Return of Bottom-Line Thinking

As you read the chapters dedicated to each kind of thinking, you will discover that they do not try to tell you *what* to think; they attempt to teach you *how* to think. As you become acquainted with each skill, you will find that some you do well, others you don't. Learn to develop each of those kinds of thinking, and you will become a better thinker. Master all that you can—including the process of shared thinking which helps you compensate for your weak areas—and your life will change.

1



Cultivate Big-Picture Thinking

“Where success is concerned, people are not measured in inches, or pounds, or college degrees, or family background; they are measured by the size of their thinking.”

—DAVID SCHWARTZ

Big-picture thinking can benefit any person in any profession. When somebody like Jack Welch tells a GE employee that the ongoing relationship with the customer is more important than the sale of an individual product, he’s reminding them of the big picture. When two parents are fed up with potty training, poor grades, or fender-benders, and one reminds the other that the current difficult time is only a temporary season, then they benefit from thinking big picture. Real estate developer Donald Trump quipped, “You have to think anyway, so why not think big?” Big-picture thinking brings wholeness and maturity to a person’s thinking. It brings perspective. It’s like making the frame of a picture bigger, in the process expanding not only what you can see, but what you are able to do.

Spend time with big-picture thinkers, and you will find that they:

Learn Continually

Big-picture thinkers are never satisfied with what they already know. They are always visiting new places, reading new books, meeting new people, learning new skills. And because of that practice, they often are able to connect the unconnected. They are lifelong learners.

To help me maintain a learner's attitude, I spend a few moments every morning thinking about my learning opportunities for the day. As I review my calendar and to-do list—knowing whom I will meet that day, what I will read, which meetings I will attend—I note where I am most likely to learn something. Then I mentally cue myself to look attentively for something that will improve me in that situation. If you desire to keep learning, I want to encourage you to examine your day and look for opportunities to learn.

Listen Intentionally

An excellent way to broaden your experience is to listen to someone who has expertise in an area where you don't. I search for such opportunities. One year I spoke to about 900 coaches and scouts at the Senior Bowl, where graduating football players participate in their last college game. I had the opportunity, along with my son-in-law, Steve Miller, to have dinner with NFL head coaches Dave Wannstedt and Butch Davis. It's not often that you get such an opportunity, so I asked them questions about teamwork and spent a lot of time listening to them. At the end of the evening, as Steve and I were walking to our car, he said to me, "John, I bet you asked those coaches a hundred questions tonight."

"If I'm going to learn and grow," I replied, "I must know what questions to ask and know how to apply the answers to my life. Listening has taught me a lot more than talking."

When you meet with people, it's good to have an agenda so that you can learn. It's a great way to partner with people who can do things you can't. Big-picture thinkers recognize that they don't know lots of things. They frequently ask penetrating questions to enlarge their understanding and thinking. If you want to become a better big-picture thinker, then become a good listener.

Look Expansively

Writer Henry David Thoreau wrote, “Many an object is not seen, though it falls within the range of our visual ray, because it does not come within the range of our intellectual ray.” Human beings habitually see their own world first. For example, when people arrive at a leadership conference put on by my company, they want to know where they’re going to park, whether they will be able to get a good (and comfortable) seat, whether the speaker will be “on,” and if the breaks will be spaced right. When I arrive to speak at the same conference, I want to know that the lighting is good, the sound equipment is operating effectively, whether the speaker’s platform will be close enough to the people, etc. Who you are determines what you see—and how you think.

Big-picture thinkers realize there is a world out there besides their own, and they make an effort to get outside of themselves and see other people’s worlds through their eyes. It’s hard to see the picture while inside the frame. To see how others see, you must first find out how they think. Becoming a good listener certainly helps with that. So does getting over your personal agenda and trying to take the other person’s perspective.

Live Completely

French essayist Michel Eyquem de Montaigne wrote, “The value of life lies not in the length of days, but in the use we make of them; a man may live long yet live very little.” The truth is that you can spend your life any way you want, but you can spend it only once. Becoming a big-picture thinker can help you to live with wholeness, to live a very fulfilling life. People who see the big picture expand their experience because they expand their world. As a result, they accomplish more than narrow-minded people. And they experience fewer unwanted surprises, too, because they are more likely to see the many components involved in any given situation: issues, people, relationships, timing, and values. They are also, therefore, usually more tolerant of other people and their thinking.

WHY YOU SHOULD RECEIVE THE WISDOM OF BIG-PICTURE THINKING

Intuitively, you probably recognize big-picture thinking as beneficial. Few people want to be closed-minded. No one sets out to be that way. But just in case you're not completely convinced, consider several specific reasons why you should make the effort to become a better big-picture thinker:

1. Big-Picture Thinking Allows You to Lead

You can find many big-picture thinkers who aren't leaders, but you will find few leaders who are not big-picture thinkers. Leaders must be able to do many important things for their people:

- **See the vision before their people do.** They also see more of it. This allows them to...
- **Size up situations, taking into account many variables.** Leaders who see the big picture discern possibilities as well as problems to form a foundation to build the vision. Once leaders have done that, they can...
- **Sketch a picture of where the team is going,** including any potential challenges or obstacles. The goal of leaders shouldn't be merely to make their people feel good, but to help them be good and accomplish the dream. The vision, shown accurately, will allow leaders to...
- **Show how the future connects with the past to make the journey more meaningful.** When leaders recognize this need for connection and bridge it, then they can...
- **Seize the moment when the timing is right.** In leadership, when to move is as important as what you do. As Winston Churchill said, "There comes a special moment in everyone's life, a moment for which that person was born.... When he seizes it... it is his finest hour."

Whether building roads, planning a trip, or moving in leadership, big-picture thinking allows you to enjoy more success. People who are constantly looking at the whole picture have the best chance of succeeding in any endeavor.

2. Big-Picture Thinking Keeps You on Target

Thomas Fuller, chaplain to Charles II of England, observed, “He that is everywhere is nowhere.” To get things done, you need focus. However, to get the right things done, you also need to consider the big picture. Only by putting your daily activities in the context of the big picture will you be able to stay on target. As Alvin Toffler says, “You’ve got to think about ‘big things’ while you’re doing small things, so that all the small things go in the right direction.”

3. Big-Picture Thinking Allows You to See What Others See

One of the most important skills you can develop in human relations is the ability to see things from the other person's point of view. It's one of the keys to working with clients, satisfying customers, maintaining a marriage, rearing children, helping those who are less fortunate, etc. All human interactions are enhanced by the ability to put yourself in another person's shoes. How? Look beyond yourself, your own interests, and your own world. When you work to consider an issue from every possible angle, examine it in the light of another's history, discover the interests and concerns of others, and try to set aside your own agenda, you begin to see what others see. And that is a powerful thing.

4. Big-Picture Thinking Promotes Teamwork

If you participate in any kind of team activity, then you know how important it is that team members see the whole picture, not just their own part. Anytime a person doesn't know how his work fits with that of his teammates, then the whole team is in trouble. The better the grasp team members have of the big picture, the greater their potential to work together as a team.

5. Big-Picture Thinking Keeps You from Being Caught Up in the Mundane

Let's face it: some aspects of everyday life are absolutely necessary but thoroughly uninteresting. Big-picture thinkers don't let the grind get to them, because they don't lose sight of the all-important overview. They know that the person who forgets the ultimate is a slave to the immediate.

6. Big-Picture Thinking Helps You to Chart Uncharted Territory

Have you ever heard the expression, “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it”? That phrase undoubtedly was coined by someone who had trouble seeing the big picture. The world was built by people who “crossed bridges” in their minds long before anyone else did. The only way to break new ground or move into uncharted territory is to look beyond the immediate and see the big picture.

HOW TO ACQUIRE THE WISDOM OF BIG-PICTURE THINKING

If you desire to seize new opportunities and open new horizons, then you need to add big-picture thinking to your abilities. To become a good thinker better able to see the big picture, keep in mind the following suggestions:

1. Don't Strive for Certainty

Big-picture thinkers are comfortable with ambiguity. They don't try to force every observation or piece of data into pre-formulated mental cubby holes. They think broadly and can juggle many seemingly contradictory thoughts in their minds. If you want to cultivate the ability to think big picture, then you must get used to embracing and dealing with complex and diverse ideas.

2. Learn from Every Experience

Big-picture thinkers broaden their outlook by striving to learn from every experience. They don't rest on their successes, they learn from them. More importantly, they learn from their failures. They can do that because they remain teachable.

Varied experiences—both positive and negative—help you see the big picture. The greater the variety of experience and success, the more potential to learn you have. If you desire to be a big-picture thinker, then get out there and try a lot of things, take a lot of chances, and take time to learn after every victory or defeat.

3. Gain Insight from a Variety of People

Big-picture thinkers learn from their experiences. But they also learn from experiences they don't have. That is, they learn by receiving insight from others—from customers, employees, colleagues, and leaders.

If you desire to broaden your thinking and see more of the big picture, then seek out counselors to help you. But be wise in whom you ask for advice. Gaining insight from a variety of people doesn't mean stopping anyone and everyone in hallways and grocery store lines and asking what they think about a given subject. Be selective. Talk to people who know and care about you, who know their field, and who bring experience deeper and broader than your own.

4. Give Yourself Permission to Expand Your World

If you want to be a big-picture thinker, you will have to go against the flow of the world. Society wants to keep people in boxes. Most people are married mentally to the status quo. They want what was, not what can be. They seek safety and simple answers. To think big-picture, you need to give yourself permission to go a different way, to break new ground, to find new worlds to conquer. And when your world does get bigger, you need to celebrate. Never forget there is more out there in the world than what you've experienced.

Keep learning, keep growing, and keep looking at the big picture! If you desire to be a good thinker, that's what you need to do.

Thinking Question

Am I thinking beyond myself and my world so that I process ideas with a holistic perspective?



Engage in Focused Thinking

“He did each thing as if he did nothing else.”

—SPOKEN OF NOVELIST CHARLES DICKENS

Philosopher Bertrand Russell once asserted, “To be able to concentrate for a considerable time is essential to difficult achievement.” Sociologist Robert Lynd observed that “knowledge is power only if a man knows what facts are not to bother about.” Focused thinking removes distractions and mental clutter so that you can concentrate on an issue and think with clarity. Focused thinking can do several things for you:

1. Focused Thinking Harnesses Energy Toward a Desired Goal

Focus can bring energy and power to almost anything, whether physical or mental. If you're learning how to pitch a baseball and you want to develop a good curveball, then focused thinking while practicing will improve your technique. If you need to refine the manufacturing process of your product, focused thinking will help you develop the best method. If you want to solve a difficult mathematics problem, focused thinking helps you break through to the solution. The greater the difficulty of a problem or issue, the more focused thinking time is necessary to solve it.

2. Focused Thinking Gives Ideas Time to Develop

I love to discover and develop ideas. I often bring my creative team together for brainstorming and creative thinking. When we first get together, we try to be exhaustive in our thinking in order to generate as many ideas as possible. The birthing of a potential breakthrough often results from sharing many good ideas.

But to take ideas to the next level, you must shift from being expansive in your thinking to being selective. I have discovered that a good idea can become a great idea when it is given focus time. It's true that focusing on a single idea for a long time can be very frustrating. I've often spent days focusing on a thought and trying to develop it, only to find that I could not improve the idea. But sometimes my perseverance in focused thinking pays off. That brings me great joy. And when focused thinking is at its best, not only does the idea grow, but so do I!

3. Focused Thinking Brings Clarity to the Target

I consider golf one of my favorite hobbies. It's a wonderfully challenging game. I like it because the objectives are so clear. Professor William Mobley of the University of South Carolina made the following observation about golf:

One of the most important things about golf is the presence of clear goals. You see the pins, you know the par—it's neither too easy nor unattainable, you know your average score, and there are competitive goals—competitive with par, with yourself and others. These goals give you something to shoot at. In work, as in golf, goals motivate.

One time on the golf course, I followed a golfer who neglected to put the pin back in the hole after he putted. Because I could not see my target, I couldn't focus properly. My focus quickly turned to frustration—and to poor play. To be a good golfer, a person needs to focus on a clear target. The same is true in thinking. Focus helps you to know the goal—and to achieve it.

4. Focused Thinking Will Take You to the Next Level

No one achieves greatness by becoming a generalist. You don't hone a skill by diluting your attention to its development. The only way to get to the next level is to focus. No matter whether your goal is to increase your level of play, sharpen your business plan, improve your bottom line, develop your subordinates, or solve personal problems, you need to focus. Author Harry A. Overstreet observed, "The immature mind hops from one thing to another; the mature mind seeks to follow through."

WHERE SHOULD YOU FOCUS YOUR THINKING?

Does every area of your life deserve dedicated, focused thinking time? Of course, the answer is no. Be selective, not exhaustive, in your focused thinking. For me, that means dedicating in-depth thinking time to four areas: leadership, creativity, communication, and intentional networking. Your choices will probably differ from mine. Here are a few suggestions to help you figure them out:

Identify Your Priorities

First, take into account your priorities—for yourself, your family, and your team. Author, consultant, and award-winning thinker Edward DeBono quipped, “A conclusion is the place where you get tired of thinking.” Unfortunately, many people land on priorities based on where they run out of steam. You certainly don’t want to do that. Nor do you want to let others set your agenda.

There are many ways to determine priorities. If you know yourself well, begin by focusing on your strengths, the things that make best use of your skills and God-given talents. You might also focus on what brings the highest return and reward. Do what you enjoy most and do best. You could use the 80/20 rule. Give 80 percent of your effort to the top 20 percent (most important) activities. Another way is to focus on exceptional opportunities that promise a huge return. It comes down to this: give your attention to the areas that bear fruit.

Discover Your Gifts

Not all people are self-aware and have a good handle on their own skills, gifts, and talents. They are a little like the comic strip character Charlie Brown. One day after striking out in a baseball game, he says, “Rats! I’ll never be a big-league player. I just don’t have it! All my life I’ve dreamed of playing in the big leagues, but I’ll never make it.”

To which Lucy replies, “Charlie Brown, you’re thinking too far ahead. What you need to do is set more immediate goals for yourself.”

For a moment, Charlie Brown sees a ray of hope. “Immediate goals?” he says.

“Yes,” answers Lucy. “Start with the next inning. When you go out to pitch, see if you can walk out to the mound without falling down!”

I’ve met many individuals who grew up in a household full of Lucys. They received little encouragement or affirmation, and as a result seem at a loss for direction. If you have that kind of background, you need to work extra hard to figure out what your gifts are. Take a personality profile such as DISC or Myers-Briggs. Interview positive friends and family members to see where they think you shine. Spend some time reflecting on past successes. If you’re going to focus your thinking in your areas of strength, you need to know what they are.

Develop Your Dream

If you want to achieve great things, you need to have a great dream. If you're not sure of your dream, use your focused thinking time to help you discover it. If your thinking has returned to a particular area time after time, you may be able to discover your dream there. Give it more focused time and see what happens. Once you find your dream, move forward without second-guessing. Take the advice of Satchel Paige: "Don't look back—something might be gaining on you."

The younger you are, the more likely you will give your attention to many things. That's good because if you're young you're still getting to know yourself, your strengths and weaknesses. If you focus your thinking on only one thing and your aspirations change, then you've wasted your best mental energy. As you get older and more experienced, the need to focus becomes more critical. The farther and higher you go, the more focused you can be—and need to be.

HOW CAN YOU STAY FOCUSED?

Once you have a handle on what you should think about, you must decide how to better focus on it. Here are five suggestions to help you with the process:

1. Remove Distractions

Removing distractions is no small matter in our current culture, but it's critical. How do you do it? First, by maintaining the discipline of practicing your priorities. Don't do easy things first or hard things first or urgent things first. Do first things first—the activities that give you the highest return. In that way, you keep the distractions to a minimum.

Second, insulate yourself from distractions. I've found that I need blocks of time to think without interruptions. I've mastered the art of making myself unavailable when necessary and going off to my "thinking place" so that I can work without interruptions. Because of my responsibilities as founder of three companies, however, I am always aware of the tension between my need to remain accessible to others as a leader and my need to withdraw from them to think. The best way to resolve the tension is to understand the value of both activities. Walking slowly through the crowd allows me to connect with people and know their needs. Withdrawing from the crowd allows me to think of ways to add value to them.

My advice to you is to place value on and give attention to both. If you naturally withdraw, then make sure to get out among people more often. If you're always on the go and rarely withdraw for thinking time, then remove yourself periodically so that you can unleash the potential of focused thinking. And wherever you are... be there!

2. Make Time for Focused Thinking

Once you have a place to think, you need the time to think. Because of the fast pace of our culture, people tend to multi-task. But that's not always a good idea. Switching from task to task can cost you up to 40 percent efficiency. According to researchers, "If you're trying to accomplish many things at the same time, you'll get more done by focusing on one task at a time, not by switching constantly from one task to another."²

Years ago I realized that my best thinking time occurs in the morning. Whenever possible, I reserve my mornings for thinking and writing. One way to gain time for focused thinking is to impose upon yourself a rule that one company implemented. Don't allow yourself to look at e-mail until after 10 A.M. Instead, focus your energies on your number one priority. Put non-productive time wasters on hold so that you can create thinking time for yourself.

3. Keep Items of Focus Before You

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the great transcendental thinker, believed, “Concentration is the secret of strength in politics, in war, in trade, in short in all management of human affairs.” To help me concentrate on the things that matter, I work to keep important items before me. One way is to ask my assistant, Linda Eggers, to keep bringing it up, asking me about it, giving me additional information in reference to it.

I’ll also keep a file or a page on my desk so that I see it every day as I work. That strategy has successfully helped me for thirty years to stimulate and sharpen ideas. If you’ve never done it, I recommend that you try it. (I’ll tell you more about it in the section on reflective thinking.)

4. Set Goals

I believe goals are important. The mind will not focus until it has clear objectives. But the purpose of goals is to focus your attention and give you direction, not to identify a final destination. As you think about your goals, note that they should be

- Clear enough to be kept in focus
- Close enough to be achieved
- Helpful enough to change lives

Those guidelines will get you going. And be sure to write down your goals. If they're not written, I can almost guarantee that they're not focused enough. And if you *really* want to make sure they're focused, take the advice of David Belasco, who says, "If you can't write your idea on the back of my business card, you don't have a clear idea."

Even if you look back years from now and think your goals were too small, they will have served their purpose—if they provide you with direction.

5. Question Your Progress

Take a good look at yourself from time to time to see whether you are actually making progress. That is the most accurate measure of whether you are making the best use of focused thinking. Ask yourself, “Am I seeing a return for my investment of focused thinking time? Is what I am doing getting me closer to my goals? Am I headed in a direction that helps me to fulfill my commitments, maintain my priorities, and realize my dreams?”

WHAT ARE YOU GIVING UP TO GO UP?

No one can go to the highest level and remain a generalist. My dad used to say, “Find the one thing you do well and don’t do anything else.” I’ve found that to do well at a few things, I have had to give up many things. As I worked on this chapter, I spent some time reflecting on the kinds of things I’ve given up. Here are the main ones:

I Can't Know Everyone

I love people, and I'm outgoing. Put me into a room full of people, and I feel energized. So it goes against my grain to restrict myself from spending time with lots of people. To compensate for that, I've done a couple of things. First, I've chosen a strong inner circle of people. They not only provide tremendous professional help, but they also make life's journey much more pleasant. Second, I ask certain friends to catch me up on what's happening in the lives of other friends. I usually do that when I'm traveling and can't block out the time I would need for focused thinking.

I Can't Do Everything

There are only a few exceptional opportunities in any person's lifetime. That's why I strive for excellence in a few things rather than a good performance in many. That's cost me. Because of my workload, I also have to skip doing many things that I would love to do. For example, every week I hand off projects that I think would be fun to do myself. I practice the 10-80-10 principle with the people to whom I'm delegating a task. I help with the first 10 percent by casting vision, laying down parameters, providing resources, and giving encouragement. Then once they've done the middle 80 percent, I come alongside them again and help them take whatever it is the rest of the way, if I can. I call it putting the cherry on top.

I Can't Go Everywhere

Every conference speaker and author has to travel a lot. Before I began doing much speaking, that seemed like a glamorous life. But after logging several million miles, I know what kind of a toll it can take. Ironically, I still love traveling for pleasure with my wife, Margaret. It's one of our great joys. She and I could take ten vacations a year and enjoy every one of them. Yet we can't, because so much of my time is consumed doing what I was called to do: help people to grow personally and to develop as leaders.

I Can't Be Well-Rounded

Being focused also keeps me from being well-rounded. I tell people, “Ninety-nine percent of everything in life I don’t need to know about.” I try to focus on the one percent that gives the highest return. And of the remaining ninety-nine, Margaret keeps me aware of whatever I need to know. It’s one of the ways I keep from getting totally out of balance in my life.

Being willing to give up some of the things you love in order to focus on what has the greatest impact isn’t an easy lesson to learn. But the earlier you embrace it, the sooner you can dedicate yourself to excellence in what matters most.

Thinking Question

Am I dedicated to removing distractions and mental clutter so that I can concentrate with clarity on the real issue?



Harness Creative Thinking

“The joy is in creating, not maintaining.”

—VINCE LOMBARDI, NFL HALL OF FAME COACH

Creativity is pure gold, no matter what you do for a living. Annette Moser-Wellman, author of *The Five Faces of Genius*, asserts, “*The most valuable resource you bring to your work and to your firm is your creativity. More than what you get done, more than the role you play, more than your title, more than your ‘output’—it’s your ideas that matter.*”³ Despite the importance of a person’s ability to think with creativity, few people seem to possess the skill in abundance.

If you’re not as creative as you would like to be, you can change your way of thinking. Creative thinking isn’t necessarily original thinking. In fact, I think people mythologize original thought. Most often, creative thinking is a composite of other thoughts discovered along the way. Even the great artists, whom we consider highly original, learned from their masters, modeled their work on that of others, and brought together a host of ideas and styles to create their own work. Study art, and you will see threads that run through the work of all artists and artistic movements, connecting them to other artists who went before them.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CREATIVE THINKERS

Perhaps you're not even sure what I mean when I ask whether you are a creative thinker. Consider some characteristics that creative thinkers have in common:

Creative Thinkers Value Ideas

Annette Moser-Wellman observes, “Highly creative people are dedicated to ideas. They don’t rely on their talent alone; they rely on their discipline. Their imagination is like a second skin. They know how to manipulate it to its fullest.” ⁴ Creativity is about having ideas—lots of them. You will have ideas only if you value ideas.

Creative Thinkers Explore Options

I've yet to meet a creative thinker who didn't love options. Exploring a multitude of possibilities helps to stimulate the imagination, and imagination is crucial to creativity. As Albert Einstein put it, "Imagination is more important than knowledge."

People who know me well will tell you that I place a very high value on options. Why? Because they provide the key to finding the best answer—not the only answer. Good thinkers come up with the best answers. They create back-up plans that provide them with alternatives. They enjoy freedom that others do not possess. And they will influence and lead others.

Creative Thinkers Embrace Ambiguity

Writer H. L. Mencken said, “It is the dull man who is always sure, and the sure man who is always dull.” Creative people don’t feel the need to stamp out uncertainty. They see all kinds of inconsistencies and gaps in life, and they often take delight in exploring those gaps—or in using their imagination to fill them in.

Creative Thinkers Celebrate the Offbeat

Creativity, by its very nature, often explores off of the beaten path and goes against the grain. Diplomat and longtime president of Yale University Kingman Brewster said, “There is a correlation between the creative and the screwball. So we must suffer the screwball gladly.” To foster creativity in yourself or others, be willing to tolerate a little oddness.

Creative Thinkers Connect the Unconnected

Because creativity utilizes the ideas of others, there's great value in being able to connect one idea to another—especially to seemingly unrelated ideas. Graphic designer Tim Hansen says, “Creativity is especially expressed in the ability to make connections, to make associations, to turn things around and express them in a new way.”

Creating additional thoughts is like taking a trip in your car. You may know where you are going, but only as you move toward your destination can you see and experience things in a way not possible before you started. Creative thinking works something like this:

THINK _ COLLECT _ CREATE _ CORRECT _ CONNECT

Once you begin to think, you are free to collect. You ask yourself, *What material relates to this thought?* Once you have the material, you ask, *What ideas can make the thought better?* That can start to take an idea to the next level. After that, you can correct or refine it by asking, *What changes can make these ideas better?* Finally, you connect the ideas by positioning them in the right context to make the thought complete and powerful.

Creative Thinkers Don't Fear Failure

Creativity demands the ability to be unafraid of failure because creativity equals failure. You may be surprised to hear such a statement, but it's true. Charles Frankel asserts that "anxiety is the essential condition of intellectual and artistic creation." Creativity requires a willingness to look stupid. It means getting out on a limb—knowing that the limb often breaks! Creative people know these things and still keep searching for new ideas. They just don't let the ideas that *don't* work prevent them from coming up with more ideas that *do* work.

WHY YOU SHOULD DISCOVER THE JOY OF CREATIVE THINKING

Creativity can improve a person's quality of life. Here are five specific things creative thinking has the potential to do for you:

1. Creative Thinking Adds Value to Everything

Wouldn't you enjoy a limitless reservoir of ideas that you could draw upon at any time? That's what creative thinking gives you. For that reason, no matter what you are currently able to do, creativity can increase your capabilities.

Creativity is being able to see what everybody else has seen and think what nobody else has thought so that you can do what nobody else has done. Sometimes creative thinking lies along the lines of invention, where you break new ground. Other times it moves along the lines of innovation, which helps you to do old things in a new way. But either way, it's seeing the world through sufficiently new eyes so that new solutions appear. That always adds value.

2. Creative Thinking Compounds

Over the years, I've found that

Creative Thinking Is Hard Work
but

Creative Thinking Compounds Given Enough
Time and Focus

Perhaps more than any other kind of thinking, creative thinking builds on itself and increases the creativity of the thinker. Poet Maya Angelou observed, "You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have. Sadly, too often creativity is smothered rather than nurtured. There has to be a climate in which new ways of thinking, perceiving, questioning are encouraged." If you cultivate creative thinking in an environment that nurtures creativity, there's no telling what kind of ideas you can come up with. (I'll talk more on that later.)

3. Creative Thinking Draws People to You and Your Ideas

Creativity is intelligence having fun. People admire intelligence, and they are always attracted to fun—so the combination is fantastic. If anyone could be said to have fun with his intelligence, it was Leonardo da Vinci. The diversity of his ideas and expertise staggers the mind. He was a painter, architect, sculptor, anatomist, musician, inventor, and engineer. The term *Renaissance man* was coined because of him.

Just as people were drawn to Da Vinci and his ideas during the Renaissance, they are drawn to creative people today. If you cultivate creativity, you will become more attractive to other people, and they will be drawn to you.

4. Creative Thinking Helps You Learn More

Author and creativity expert Ernie Zelinski says, “Creativity is the joy of not knowing it all. The joy of not knowing it all refers to the realization that we seldom if ever have all the answers; we always have the ability to generate more solutions to just about any problem. Being creative is being able to see or imagine a great deal of opportunity to life’s problems. Creativity is having options.” [5](#)

It almost seems too obvious to say, but if you are always actively seeking new ideas, you will learn. Creativity is teachability. It’s seeing more solutions than problems. And the greater the quantity of thoughts, the greater the chance for learning something new.

5. Creative Thinking Challenges the Status Quo

If you desire to improve your world—or even your own situation—then creativity will help you. The status quo and creativity are incompatible. Creativity and innovation always walk hand in hand.

HOW TO DISCOVER THE JOY OF CREATIVE THINKING

At this point you may be saying, “Okay, I’m convinced that creative thinking is important. But how do I find the creativity within me? How do I discover the joy of creative thought?” Here are five ways to do it:

1. Remove Creativity Killers

Economics professor and humor author Stephen Leacock said, “Personally, I would sooner have written *Alice in Wonderland* than the whole *Encyclopedia Britannica*.” He valued the warmth of creativity over cold facts. If you do too, then you need to eliminate attitudes that devalue creative thinking.

Take a look at the following phrases. They are almost guaranteed to kill creative thinking any time you hear (or think) them:

- I’m Not a Creative Person
- Follow the Rules
- Don’t Ask Questions
- Don’t Be Different
- Stay Within the Lines
- There Is Only One Way
- Don’t Be Foolish
- Be Practical
- Be Serious
- Think of Your Image
- That’s Not Logical
- It’s Not Practical
- It’s Never Been Done
- It Can’t Be Done
- It Didn’t Work for Them
- We Tried That Before
- It’s Too Much Work
- We Can’t Afford to Make a Mistake
- It Will Be Too Hard to Administer
- We Don’t Have the Time
- We Don’t Have the Money
- Yes, But...
- Play Is Frivolous
- Failure Is Final

If you think you have a great idea, don't let anyone talk you out of it even if it sounds foolish. Don't let yourself or anyone else subject you to creativity killers. After all, you can't do something new and exciting if you force yourself to stay in the same old rut. Don't just work harder at the same old thing. Make a change.

2. Think Creatively by Asking the Right Questions

Creativity is largely a matter of asking the right questions. Management trainer Sir Antony Jay said, “The uncreative mind can spot wrong answers, but it takes a creative mind to spot wrong questions.” Wrong questions shut down the process of creative thinking. They direct thinkers down the same *old* path, or they chide them into believing that thinking isn’t necessary at all. To stimulate creative thinking, ask yourself questions such as...

- Why must it be done *this* way?
- What is the root problem?
- What are the underlying issues?
- What does this remind me of?
- What is the opposite?
- What metaphor or symbol helps to explain it?
- Why is it important?
- What’s the *hardest* or *most expensive* way to do it?
- Who has a different perspective on this?
- What happens if we *don’t* do it at all?

You get the idea—and you can probably come up with better questions yourself. Physicist Tom Hirschfield observed, “If you don’t ask, ‘Why this?’ often enough, somebody will ask, ‘Why you?’” If you want to think creatively, you must ask good questions. You must challenge the process.

3. Develop a Creative Environment

Charlie Brower said, “A new idea is delicate. It can be killed by a sneer or a yawn; it can be stabbed to death by a quip and worried to death by a frown on the right man’s brow.” Negative environments kill thousands of great ideas every minute.

A creative environment, on the other hand, becomes like a greenhouse where ideas get seeded, sprout up, and flourish. A creative environment:

- **Encourages Creativity:** David Hills says, “Studies of creativity suggest that the biggest single variable of whether or not employees will be creative is whether they perceive they have permission.” When innovation and good thinking are openly encouraged and rewarded, then people see that they have permission to be creative.
- **Places a High Value on Trust among Team Members and Individuality:** Creativity always risks failure. That’s why trust is so important to creative people. In the creative process, trust comes from people working together, from knowing that people on the team have experience launching successful, creative ideas, and from the assurance that creative ideas won’t go to waste, because they will be implemented.
- **Embraces Those Who Are Creative:** Creative people celebrate the offbeat. How should creative people be treated? I take the advice of Tom Peters: “Weed out the dullards—nurture the nuts!” I do that by spending time with them, which I enjoy anyway. I especially like to pull people into brainstorming sessions. People look forward to an invitation to such meetings because the time will be filled with energy, ideas, and laughter. And the odds are high that a new project, seminar, or business strategy will result. When that happens, they also know a party’s coming!
- **Focuses on Innovation, Not Just Invention:** Sam Weston, creator of the popular action figure GI Joe, said, “Truly groundbreaking ideas are rare, but you don’t necessarily need one to make a career out of creativity. My definition of creativity is the logical combination of two or more existing elements that result in a new concept. The best way to

make a living with your imagination is to develop innovative applications, not imagine completely new concepts.” Creative people say, “Give me a good idea and I’ll give you a better idea!”

- **Is Willing to Let People Go Outside the Lines:** Most people automatically stay within lines, even if those lines have been arbitrarily drawn or are terribly out of date. Remember, most limitations we face are not imposed on us by others; we place them on ourselves. Lack of creativity often falls into that category. If you want to be more creative, challenge boundaries. Inventor Charles Kettering said, “All human development, no matter what form it takes, must be outside the rules; otherwise, we would never have anything new.” A creative environment takes that into account.
- **Appreciates the Power of a Dream:** A creative environment promotes the freedom of a dream. A creative environment encourages the use of a blank sheet of paper and the question, “If we could draw a picture of what we want to accomplish, what would that look like?” A creative environment allowed Martin Luther King, Jr., to speak with passion and declare to millions, “I have a dream,” not “I have a goal.” Goals may give focus, but dreams give power. Dreams expand the world. That is why James Allen suggested that “dreamers are the saviors of the world.”

The more creativity-friendly you can make your environment, the more potential it has to become creative.

4. Spend Time with Other Creative People

What if the place you work has an environment hostile to creativity, and you possess little ability to change it? One possibility is to change jobs. But what if you desire to keep working there despite the negative environment? Your best option is to find a way to spend time with other creative people.

Creativity is contagious. Have you ever noticed what happens during a good brainstorming session? One person throws out an idea. Another person uses it as a springboard to discover another idea. Someone else takes it in yet another, even better direction. Then somebody grabs hold of it and takes it to a whole new level. The interplay of ideas can be electric.

I have a strong group of creative individuals in my life. I make sure to spend regular time with them. When I leave them, I always feel energized, I'm full of ideas, and I see things differently. They truly are indispensable to my life.

It's a fact that you begin to think like the people you spend a lot of time with. The more time you can spend with creative people engaging in creative activities, the more creative you will become.

5. Get Out of Your Box

Actress Katharine Hepburn remarked, “If you obey all the rules... you will miss all the fun.” While I don’t think it’s necessary to break all the rules (many are in place to protect us), I do think it’s unwise to allow self-imposed limitations to hinder us. Creative thinkers know that they must repeatedly break out of the “box” of their own history and personal limitations in order to experience creative breakthroughs.

The most effective way to help yourself get out of the box is to expose yourself to new paradigms. One way you can do that is by traveling to new places. Explore other cultures, countries, and traditions. Find out how people very different from you live and think. Another is to read on new subjects. I’m naturally curious and love to learn, but I still have a tendency to read books only on my favorite subjects, such as leadership. I sometimes have to force myself to read books that broaden my thinking, because I know it’s worth it. If you want to break out of your own box, get into somebody’s else’s. Read broadly.

Many people mistakenly believe that if individuals aren’t born with creativity, they will never be creative. But you can see from the many strategies and examples I’ve given that creativity can be cultivated in the right supportive environment.

Thinking Question

Am I working to break out of my “box” of limitations so that I explore ideas and options to experience creative breakthroughs?



Employ Realistic Thinking

“The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality.”

—MAX DEPREE, CHAIRMAN EMERITUS OF HERMAN MILLER, INC.

As anyone knows who's been out of school for a few years, there's usually a huge gap between a college education and the reality of the working world. Honestly, early in my career, I went out of my way to avoid too much realistic thinking because I thought it would interfere with my creative thinking. But as I've grown, I've come to realize that realistic thinking adds to my life.

REALITY CHECK

Reality is the difference between what we wish for and what is. It took some time for me to evolve into a realistic thinker. The process went in phases. First, I did not engage in realistic thinking at all. After a while, I realized that it was necessary, so I began to engage in it occasionally. (But I didn't like it because I thought it was too negative. And any time I could delegate it, I did.) Eventually, I found that I *had* to engage in realistic thinking if I was going to solve problems and learn from my mistakes. And in time, I became willing to think realistically *before* I got in trouble and make it a continual part of my life. Today, I encourage my key leaders to think realistically. We make realistic thinking the foundation of our business because we derive certainty and security from it.

Why You Should Recognize the Importance of Realistic Thinking

If you're a naturally optimistic person, as I am, you may not possess great desire to become a more realistic thinker. But cultivating the ability to be realistic in your thinking will not undermine your faith in people, nor will it lessen your ability to see and seize opportunities. Instead, it will add value to you in other ways:

1. Realistic Thinking Minimizes Downside Risk

Actions always have consequences; realistic thinking helps you to determine what those consequences could be. And that's crucial, because only by recognizing and considering consequences can you plan for them. If you plan for the worst-case scenario, you can minimize the downside risk.

2. Realistic Thinking Gives You a Target and Game Plan

I've known businesspeople who were not realistic thinkers. Here's the good news: they were very positive and had a high degree of hope for their business. Here's the bad news: hope is not a strategy.

Realistic thinking leads to excellence in leadership and management because it requires people to face reality. They begin to define their target and develop a game plan to hit it. When people engage in realistic thinking, they also begin to simplify practices and procedures, which results in better efficiency.

Truthfully, in business only a few decisions are important. Realistic thinkers understand the difference between the important decisions and those that are merely necessary in the normal course of business. The decisions that matter relate directly to your purpose. James Allen was right when he wrote, "Until thought is linked with purpose there is no intelligent accomplishment." [6](#)

3. Realistic Thinking Is a Catalyst for Change

People who rely on hope for their success rarely make change a high priority. If you have only hope, you imply that achievement and success are out of your hands. It's a matter of luck or chance. Why bother changing?

Realistic thinking can dispel that kind of wrong attitude. There's nothing like staring reality in the face to make a person recognize the need for change. Change alone doesn't bring growth but you cannot have growth without change.

4. Realistic Thinking Provides Security

Any time you have thought through the worst that can happen and you have developed contingency plans to meet it, you become more confident and secure. It's reassuring to know that you are unlikely to be surprised. Disappointment is the difference between expectations and reality. Realistic thinking minimizes the difference between the two.

5. Realistic Thinking Gives You Credibility

Realistic thinking helps people to buy in to the leader and his or her vision. Leaders continually surprised by the unexpected soon lose credibility with their followers. On the other hand, leaders who think realistically and plan accordingly position their organizations to win. That gives their people confidence in them.

The best leaders ask realistic questions *before* casting vision. They ask themselves things like...

- Is it possible?
- Does this dream include everyone or just a few?
- Have I identified and articulated the areas that will make this dream difficult to achieve?

6. Realistic Thinking Provides a Foundation to Build On

Thomas Edison observed, “The value of a good idea is in using it.” The bottom line on realistic thinking is that it helps you to make an idea usable by taking away the “wish” factor. Most ideas and efforts don’t accomplish their intended results because they rely too much on what we wish rather than what is.

You can’t build a house in midair; it needs a solid foundation. Ideas and plans are the same. They need something concrete on which to build. Realistic thinking provides that solid foundation.

7. Realistic Thinking Is a Friend to Those in Trouble

If creativity is what you would do if you were unafraid of the possibility of failure, then reality is dealing with failure if it does happen. Realistic thinking gives you something concrete to fall back on during times of trouble, which can be very reassuring. Certainty in the midst of uncertainty brings stability.

8. Realistic Thinking Brings the Dream to Fruition

British novelist John Galsworthy wrote, “Idealism increases in direct proportion to one’s distance from the problem.” If you don’t get close enough to a problem, you can’t tackle it. If you don’t take a realistic look at your dream—and what it will take to accomplish it—you will never achieve it. Realistic thinking helps to pave the way for bringing any dream to fruition.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF REALISTIC THINKING

Because I'm naturally optimistic rather than realistic, I've had to take concrete steps to improve my thinking in this area. Here are five things I do to improve my realistic thinking:

1. Develop an Appreciation for Truth

I could not develop as a realistic thinker until I gained an appreciation for realistic thinking. And that means learning to look at and enjoy truth. President Harry S. Truman said, “I never give ’em hell. I just tell the truth and they think it is hell.” That’s the way many people react to truth. People tend to exaggerate their success and minimize their failures or deficiencies. They live according to Ruckert’s Law, believing there is nothing so small that it can’t be blown out of proportion.

Unfortunately, many people today could be described by a quote from Winston Churchill: “Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing has happened.” More recently, television journalist Ted Koppel observed, “Our society finds truth too strong a medicine to digest undiluted. In its purest form, truth is not a polite tap on the shoulder. It is a howling reproach.” In other words, the truth will set you free—but first it will make you angry! If you want to become a realistic thinker, however, you need to get comfortable dealing with the truth and face up to it.

2. Do Your Homework

The process of realistic thinking begins with doing your homework. You must first get the facts. Former governor, congressman, and ambassador Chester Bowles said, “When you approach a problem, strip yourself of preconceived opinions and prejudice, assemble and learn the facts of the situation, make the decision which seems to you to be the most honest, and then stick to it.” It doesn’t matter how sound your thinking is if it’s based on faulty data or assumptions. You can’t think well in the absence of facts (or in the presence of poor information).

You can also find out what others have done in similar circumstances. Remember, your thinking doesn’t necessarily have to be original; it just has to be solid. Why not learn all that you can from good thinkers who have faced similar situations in the past? Some of my best thinking has been done by others!

3. Think Through the Pros and Cons

There's nothing like taking the time to really examine the pros and cons of an issue to give you a strong dose of reality. It rarely comes down to simply choosing the course of action with the greatest number of pros, because all pros and cons do not carry equal weight. But that's not the value of the exercise, anyway. Rather, it helps you to dig into the facts, examine an issue from many angles, and really count the cost of a possible course of action.

4. Picture the Worst-Case Scenario

The essence of realistic thinking is discovering, picturing, and examining the worst-case scenario. Ask yourself questions such as:

- What if sales fall short of projections?
- What if revenue hits rock bottom? (Not an optimist's rock bottom, but real rock bottom!)
- What if we don't win the account?
- What if the client doesn't pay us?
- What if we have to do the job short-handed?
- What if our best player gets sick?
- What if all the colleges reject my application?
- What if the market goes belly up?
- What if the volunteers quit?
- What if nobody shows up?

You get the idea. The point is that you need to think about worst-case possibilities whether you are running a business, leading a department, pastoring a church, coaching a team, or planning your personal finances. Your goal isn't to be negative or to expect the worst, just to be ready for it in case it happens. That way, you give yourself the best chance for a positive result—no matter what.

If you picture the worst case and examine it honestly, then you really have experienced a reality check. You're ready for anything. As you do that, take the advice of Charles Hole, who advised, "Deliberate with caution, but act with decision; and yield with graciousness or oppose with firmness."

5. Align Your Thinking with Your Resources

One of the keys to maximizing realistic thinking is aligning your resources with your objectives. Looking at pros and cons and examining worst-case scenarios will make you aware of any gaps between what you desire and what really is. Once you know what those gaps are, you can use your resources to fill them. After all, that's what resources are for.

SUPER BOWL, SUPER DOME, SUPER SECURITY

Our country received lessons in realistic thinking following the tragedy of September 11, 2001. The destruction of the World Trade Center buildings in New York City far surpassed any worst-case scenarios that anyone might have envisioned. In the wake of that event, we now find that we don't have the luxury of avoiding or neglecting realistic thinking.

I was reminded of that on Sunday, February 3, 2002, when I attended the Super Bowl in New Orleans, Louisiana. I had been to the big game twice before, to root for the home team—first San Diego and later Atlanta—and had seen both teams lose! But I had never been to a game like this. The occasion had been designated a National Security Special Event. That meant that the U.S. Secret Service would be overseeing it; military personnel would work with local law enforcement; and security would be of the highest caliber. The Secret Service brought in several hundred agents and secured the area. In preparation for the game, access to the Super Dome was highly restricted, with intensified screening. Officials blocked off roads, closed the nearby interstate, and designated the area a no-fly zone.

We arrived early at the dome—officials suggested fans arrive up to five hours ahead of game time—and we immediately saw evidence of the precautionary measures. Eight-foot fences surrounded the whole area, and concrete barriers prevented unauthorized vehicles from getting close to the building. We could see sharpshooters positioned at various locations, including on the roof of some adjacent buildings. When we reached a gate, police officers and security personnel patted us down and examined everyone's belongings. After that they directed us to go through metal detectors. Only then did they allow us into the stadium.

“That's all well and good,” you may be saying, “but what would have happened had there been a terrorist attack?” The Secret Service had that covered too, because they had prepared for the worst-case scenario. Evacuation plans had been put into place, and personnel at the Super Dome had been drilled to make sure everyone knew what to do in case of an emergency.

New Orleans mayor Marc Morial said the day before the Super Bowl, “We want to send a message to all visitors that New Orleans is going to be the safest place in America.” ⁷ We got the message. We didn’t feel the least bit worried. That’s what happens when leaders recognize the importance of realistic thinking.

Thinking Question

Am I building a solid mental foundation on facts so that I can think with certainty?



Utilize Strategic Thinking

“Most people spend more time planning their summer vacation than planning their lives.”

—SOURCE UNKNOWN

When you hear the words “strategic thinking,” what comes to mind? Do visions of business plans dance in your head? Do you conjure up marketing plans, the kind that can turn a company around? Perhaps you contemplate global politics. Or you recall some of history’s greatest military campaigns: Hannibal crossing the Alps to surprise the Roman army, Charlemagne’s conquest of Western Europe, or the Allies’ D-Day invasion of Normandy. Perhaps, but strategy doesn’t have to be restricted to military action—or even to business. Strategic thinking can make a positive impact on any area of life.

PLAN YOUR LIFE, LIVE YOUR PLAN

I've observed that most people try to plan their lives one day at a time. They wake up, make up their to-do list, and dive into action (although some people aren't even *that* strategic).

Fewer individuals plan their lives one week at a time. They review their calendar for the week, check their appointments, review their goals, and then get to work. They generally outachieve most of their daily-planning colleagues. I try to take planning one step further.

At the beginning of every month, I spend half a day working on my calendar for the next forty days. Forty days works for me rather than just thirty. That way, I get a jump on the next month and don't get surprised. I begin by reviewing my travel schedule and planning activities with my family. Then I review what projects, lessons, and other objectives I want to accomplish during those five to six weeks. Then I start blocking out days and times for thinking, writing, working, meeting with people, etc. I set times to do fun things, such as seeing a show, watching a ball game, or playing golf. I also set aside small blocks of time to compensate for the unexpected. By the time I'm done, I can tell you nearly everything I'll be doing, almost hour by hour, during the coming weeks. This strategy is one of the reasons I have been able to accomplish much.

WHY YOU SHOULD RELEASE THE POWER OF STRATEGIC THINKING

Strategic thinking helps me to plan, to become more efficient, to maximize my strengths, and to find the most direct path toward achieving any objective. The benefits of strategic thinking are numerous. Here are a few of the reasons you should adopt it as one of your thinking tools:

1. Strategic Thinking Simplifies the Difficult

Strategic thinking is really nothing more than planning on steroids. Spanish novelist Miguel de Cervantes said, “The man who is prepared has his battle half fought.” Strategic thinking takes complex issues and long-term objectives, which can be very difficult to address, and breaks them down into manageable sizes. Anything becomes simpler when it has a plan!

Strategic thinking can also help you simplify the management of everyday life. I do that by using systems, which are nothing more than good strategies repeated. I am well known among pastors and other speakers for my filing system. Writing a lesson or speech can be difficult. But because I use my system to file quotes, stories, and articles, when I need something to flesh out or illustrate a point, I simply go to one of my 1,200 files and find a good piece of material that works. Just about any difficult task can be made simpler with strategic thinking.