Leadership & Mental Models

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When was the last time you conducted an honest evaluation of your thought life? Does the integrity and quality of your thinking position you for success, or does your tendency toward intellectually dishonest rationalizations and justifications doom you to a life of chaos and failure? Few things in life are as important as your thought life, so in today's post I'll examine the two things most likely to impact your thinking: 1.) what you think about, and 2.) how you think about it. In the text that follows I'll discuss mental models and critical thinking.
It’s been said, and rightly so, that “we become what we think about.” My challenge to you is to make sure that you are in fact thinking, that you’re thinking about the right things, and that you’re thinking critically using solid mental models. But before we get into the meat of this post, I want to encourage you to be brutally honest about your historical performance. It is critical that you don’t carry mistakes forward, that you don’t extend failed initiatives which should have died long ago, and that you don’t allow your pride and ego to impede right thinking and right decisioning. Knowingly turning a blind eye toward rational thinking and reality is a fools gambit that will cost you dearly. I urge you not to participate in the folly of self-delusion. I encourage you to be sincere in your analysis and make the most of your opportunities moving forward.

Critical thinking skills are not a luxury for senior executives – they’re a survival skill. In today’s hi-tech business world we have become reliant on any number of available business tools to help us achieve better results and to perform at higher levels. We attend classes, workshops, webcasts, conferences etc., and we read books on how to master everything from the newest software application to the latest management theory. We seem to have an insatiable thirst for anything that will provide us with a perceived competitive advantage, yet we often ignore the one tool which can provide an unequaled return on investment if developed to even a fraction of its potential… the human mind.

Most professionals intellectually understand that learning is a life-long endeavor, but the reality is that many executives and entrepreneurs invest very little in the development of the human mind once they have finished their formal education. Given that the human mind is without question the greatest and most powerful tool we possess, and that we all have free and equal access to it, I find it odd that it is also the most under developed tool for many professionals. It has been my experience that business people tend to overestimate their intellectual ability, and as a result, they often fail to make investments in endeavors of intellectual development.

Developing sound critical thinking skills are a requirement for CEOs and entrepreneurs. Being both quick of mind, and intelligent in approach with your mental analyses of a given situation simply results in fewer mistakes in judgment. The external perception with regard to a person who possesses excellent critical thinking skills is often that they have great wisdom and discernment. Critical thinking skills while related to intelligence, are not one in the same. A great critical thinker may or may not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but they will have a disciplined, fluid approach in thinking things through that often gives them the appearance of being a genius. Strong mental acuity is a competitive advantage not to be taken lightly.
Paul, Binker, Jensen, and Kreklau (1990) developed a list of 35 dimensions of critical thought. While the following list can get a bit academic, if implemented consistently, these tactics will help you better navigate the complexities of the business world:

**Affective Strategies**

1. thinking independently
2. developing insight into egocentricity or sociocentricity
3. exercising fair-mindedness
4. exploring thoughts underlying feelings and feelings underlying thoughts
5. developing intellectual humility and suspending judgment
6. developing intellectual courage
7. developing intellectual good faith or integrity
8. developing intellectual perseverance
9. developing confidence in reason

**Cognitive Strategies—Macro-Abilities**
10. refining generalizations and avoiding oversimplifications
11. comparing analogous situations: transferring insights to new contexts
12. developing one's perspective: creating or exploring beliefs, arguments, or theories
13. clarifying issues, conclusions, or beliefs
14. clarifying and analyzing the meanings of words or phrases
15. developing criteria for evaluation: clarifying values and standards
16. evaluating the credibility of sources of information
17. questioning deeply: raising and pursuing root or significant questions
18. analyzing or evaluating arguments, interpretations, beliefs, or theories
19. generating or assessing solutions
20. analyzing or evaluating actions or policies
21. reading critically: clarifying or critiquing texts
22. listening critically: the art of silent dialogue
23. making interdisciplinary connections
24. practicing Socratic discussion: clarifying and questioning beliefs, theories, or perspectives
25. reasoning dialogically: comparing perspectives, interpretations, or theories
26. reasoning dialectically: evaluating perspectives, interpretations, or theories

**Cognitive Strategies—Micro-Skills**

27. comparing and contrasting ideals with actual practice
28. thinking precisely about thinking: using critical vocabulary
29. noting significant similarities and differences
30. examining or evaluating assumptions
31. distinguishing relevant from irrelevant facts
32. making plausible inferences, predictions, or interpretations
33. evaluating evidence and alleged facts
34. recognizing contradictions
35. exploring implications and consequences

If you want to do everything possible to ensure your success as a C-level executive or entrepreneur, don't rest upon your laurels, but rather continue to make investments in your personal and professional development. Since we're on the topic of thinking, any thoughts?