



Thinking about Thinking

How to think your way to working smarter

By Paul Lemberg

How much time do you spend just thinking? Take a guess — how much during any given day, week, or month?

Most of you will answer little to none. Many people consider spending time “just thinking” to be a luxury. After all, you have real problems, all needing your time. And in our action driven society, we need to be doing something; much of the time we seem to be doing two or three things at once. But thinking?

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It seems silly to rhetorically ask why this is so important. Thinking is the process by which people and organizations create intellectual capital and knowledge. Thinking is the way we develop new ideas,

10 Thinking Questions

Here are a few questions to get your thinking process started:

1. **What is your purpose?**
2. **What do you want** that you don't have?
3. **In what ways** are you being effective? In what ways aren't you being effective?
4. **What isn't getting done** that needs to get done?
5. **What doesn't exist** in your market that you could deliver?
6. **What would** make you happy?
7. **What aren't you taking on** because you don't think you know how?
8. **What's the most important thing**, right now? What will be the most important thing next month?
9. **Who could** help you?
10. **If your resources were limitless**, what would you begin immediately?

rather than just reacting to our current circumstances. Thinking is how we invent strategy. Thinking is one of the hardest things for people to do, let alone do well. But to figure out how to make the most of

your precious resources, to leap ahead of your competition, and to master the ever-accelerating pace of change, you have no choice. You have to think about things.

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Make one up and see if it fits.

One of the most powerful kinds of thinking — particularly in the realm of strategy — is known as inquiry. In the process of inquiry, you ask questions and look at possible answers. Your goal is not a definitive answer, for that would bring the inquiry to a close. Rather, you peel back the question, like the leaves of an artichoke, revealing more questions, and more possible answers, and so on. At some point, you get to the heart of the matter, just as you get to the heart of the artichoke.

To think about an issue, focus your mind by asking one or more germane questions. Sometimes your answers will give birth to more questions. Even your unanswered questions will sometimes yield more questions.

When do you cease asking questions? You might decide to inquire into an issue for a fixed period of time, say 30 minutes, or seven days. Or, you might ask a question with the intent of coming up with 15 or 20 new and provocative answers. You might decide to keep asking questions until your answers yield no further questions, or until your questions yield no further

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Five Thinking Exercises

Here are a few simple but useful thinking and questioning exercises:

1. Use each question listed in “10 Thinking Questions” (page 15) as the basis for a daily meditation. Pick a question and put it into your mind in the morning, focusing your subconscious to generate answers for you. During the day, whenever an “answer” comes into your head, write it down.

2. Take a fresh sheet of paper and write a question at the top of it. This question could be one of those listed in “10 Thinking Questions,” or any other question you may have. Write 20 answers to the question.

3. Write 100 questions about a subject that’s important to you.

4. Gather a group of four to 12 people whose thinking you value. Tell them the topic you want them to address. Ask them to come up with questions about that topic. Edit the questions they give you. Then ask each question in turn, and have your group generate thoughts in relation to the questions.

5. Pick a book of wisdom. This could be the *Bible*, the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Upanishads*, Emerson’s *Self Reliance*, or any other book whose words you consider wise. Ask your question (again, you could choose from “10 Thinking Questions” or ask a question of your own). Then read a randomly selected passage from your book of wisdom. Try to relate the passage to your question. Let the passage help you generate some thinking. I think you’ll be surprised.

answers. You might not decide any of these things and simply stop when it feels right — when you feel you have the “right” answer. Or you might not stop at all, instead engaging in the question continually.

Then there’s the issue of answers. Many times you have no idea what an answer might be. What do you do then? One useful perspective is to simply invent an answer. Make one up and see if it fits. Trust your subconscious. Access all your stored knowledge and experience — it just might come through for you. ■

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