



10 RECIPES
FOR BETTER THINKING

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HOW ACTION-FOCUSED BUSINESS LEADERS CAN SHARPEN THEIR SKILLS

By Professor Jacques Horovitz – May 2013

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The fact is, when you teach business, you have to know business. So it's no surprise that some of the best professors are those with significant experience from the world of business. Yet, I've found some significant distinctions between academia and practitioners. For example, while a professor relies heavily on concepts and theories and prefers to maintain neutrality, a businessperson favors taking action, relying on "what worked before," and is unafraid to take a stance. Additionally, a professor focuses on a single discipline and appreciates diversity of thought, but a businessperson is required to respond to a variety of stimuli and is pressured to make quick decisions. In other words, a professor is required to think more than he or she acts, while a businessperson is expected to act far more than he or she thinks.

Though the expectations and methods of reasoning may differ between these two worlds, their styles of thinking are not contrary to one another. In fact, combining elements of both styles of thinking actually prove quite beneficial for a businessperson. As such, I've discovered through my experience in both academics and business, ten strategies that can sharpen the thinking of business leaders, equipping them to make smarter, more informed decisions in their fast-paced environment.

1. Carve out time to think

Today's culture is driven by instantaneity; what is happening today, right now, is of the utmost importance. Too often in our immediacy, small problems become big problems and we assume there is no time to think about work on a deeper level. Sometimes we need to carve out time in our day or week to simply take time to think. This of course looks differently for different people, but carving out moments to think allows for the visualization of tomorrow's trends and options and produces more informed decisions.

2. Conceptualize daily observations

Drawing concepts from "what works" in everyday life observations helps in transferring concepts and ideas to business. Concepts can become our guides for future actions and applying them can cast necessary light on complex situations or pending decisions.

3. Listen to others to expand your thinking

Too often company directors don't listen as much as they talk, or only listen to what confirms their own statements. Challenges can lead to improvements, but having such a posture prevents one from being challenged by others.

Listening means hearing without interrupting, asking open-ended questions, and rephrasing concepts to ensure that they are understood. Listening more helps in confronting our own ideas, hypotheses, and convictions with those of others, making us think of other possibilities instead of simply repeating "what's worked before."

4. Allow space for constructive doubt

Does self-confidence always equate to efficiency? Having doubts actually allows space to contemplate alternative solutions, approaches, and "tomorrows" previously unconsidered. Self-questioning does not mean we don't know what we're doing, it simply means answering questions on a deeper level that serve to either reinforce or alter our convictions, arguments, and viewpoints.

5. Step outside the box

Addressing doubt leads to discovering alternative approaches to an existing problem. However, some situations require creating a new reality altogether, which forces us to step outside of our comfort zone and be creative. New places, environments, and ways of thinking are all opportunities to stimulate creative thinking, but require us to get outside our homes and offices, social and professional networks, and our typical sources of information.

6. Expose yourself to new stimuli

Being surrounded by diverse stimuli helps to fuel deeper thinking in business. For example, I belong to the hospitality industry, but I do not go to hospitality trade shows; I prefer concept hotels, restaurants, or retailers. Thus, the people I mix with come from all walks of life, since “social consanguinity” only reinforces right-thinking conformity.

7. Provoke others' ideas to challenge your own

In today's media-dominated societies, it is difficult to form an independent opinion and it requires a fair amount of intellectual courage. On the other hand, taking the opposite stance and challenging prevailing ideas thwarts nonsense and also strengthens personal viewpoints as one who is free to think. Opposition reminds us that there might be other viable alternatives and strengthens an idea by better identifying its advantages and disadvantages.

8. Write ideas down and let them mature over time

Ideas and thoughts are fleeting; so one helpful habit to adopt is to write down ideas and thoughts as they come so they can be revisited later when they need to be transformed into action. This enables us to strengthen and flesh out the ideas in greater depth at a later date and also increases the chances of acting on them in the future.

9. Nurture lateral thinking

New ideas can be found all around us, many of which can be transferred to our personal or professional lives, no matter how unrelated they may seem at first glance. Many new ideas come just by observing others and transferring ideas or concepts to a specific context.

10. Consider problems as opportunities

Call this a positive attitude, optimism, or self-persuasion, it doesn't matter. Inverting the assertion “I have a problem” into “here is an opportunity to do better” stimulates thinking and is a recipe for success.

The fact is, in business we will continue to face situations that demand quick decisions and immediate action. However, we inevitably make better decisions and take appropriate action when we have the time to really think. Carving out time to think about pending decisions and tomorrow's trends, welcoming opposition and creativity, and embracing doubt are all practical yet meaningful ways to improve thinking processes within the business world, leading to better decisions and improved leadership.

Jacques Horovitz is Professor Emeritus of Service Strategy, Service Marketing, and Service Management at IMD, where he teaches on the [Orchestrating Winning Performance Program](#).

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