

Dumbing down and powering up your mind

A thinking leadership briefing by Andrew Norton

“Rarely do we find men who willingly engage in hard, solid thinking. There is an almost universal quest for easy answers and half-baked solutions. Nothing pains some people more than having to think.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Small is the number of people who see with their eyes and think with their minds.

Albert Einstein

The following article is a quick read outlining some of the factors working to dumb down your mind and what you can do to power it up again. Before you begin reading ask yourself the following questions:

- When was the last time you had some space to do some quality thinking?
- How many books have you read in the past 12 months?
- When are you at your creative best?
- Do you find making decisions stressful?
- How would you describe the quality of thinking in your organisation?

Dumbing down

1. Technology

Once upon-a-time back in the 70's you could be expected to know how something worked. You could even do your own car maintenance. Now it is beyond most people's ability. Technological advances are such that you no longer know how something works, only that it works or not.

2. Policy slavery

When you become a slave to policies you don't have to think, you just do what the policy says. While policies have their place, seldom is there space to review or question. "Why are we doing this?" is answered with "because that's what it says we must do!" There is no room to think outside the square when all the doors and windows are locked with policies.

3. Political correctness

The cultural rules of political correctness have made asking some questions appear critical or disrespectful. Questions not allowed to ask have led to institutional dishonesty. Tell people what they want to hear not what they need to know.

4. Specialisation

Experts, consultants and gurus have become the new gods of dummifying down. No longer are you able to think for yourself, you have to hire someone to do that for you. Specialisation has created narrow fields of expertise leaving you unable to question the expert.

5. Departmentalisation

"It's not my responsibility therefore I'm not responsible" and because it is not your responsibility you draw a line of convenience over which you dare not cross or think.

6. The speed of blink

With the pressures and demands of work you are under pressure to make decisions quickly. Trust your intuition. The space between action and reaction is as short as a "blink", there's no time to think. Recruiters spend an average of six seconds before they make the initial 'fit or no fit' decision on candidates. Time, it seems, has more value than thinking.

"A conclusion is where you get tired of thinking"
Edward de Bono

7. The paradox of choice

The more choices you have the harder it is to make a decision. Just going to the supermarket is a stressful experience. To pick your breakfast cereal you have to make one choice from 228 products. When it comes to your choice of tooth paste you have 60 choices to make. No wonder supermarket shopping is a stressful experience!

8. Information overload

Every day you get bombarded with so much information that you have become an expert at skim reading. Check the headlines and look for a few key words. Skim reading results in shallow thinking. When was the last time you read in depth, read for meaning or dared to read between the lines? With so much information it all becomes too hard.

“The problem with popular thinking is that it doesn’t require that you think at all.”

Kevin Myers

Powering up

1. Create space

Thinking requires a thinking space; ask “where do I do my best thinking?” Once you have answered ensure that you are able to create and recreate your unique thinking space.

2. Pause

Delay, even if for a few moments, the space between action and reaction. Press “pause”. It is in the pause that thinking comes.

3. Questions

The quality of your thinking is not in your answers but in your questioning. Learn the power of questions. Ask questions. Create a culture in your organisation where anyone can ask any question.

What questions is your organisation not asking?

4. See your thinking

While you are encouraged to “think outside the square” this is impossible until you have the ability to see the square your thinking is currently confined to. Draw a mind map of your current thinking square

and then step outside it by asking some questions from a new perspective. What assumptions shape your thinking and what new thoughts could come if you changed your assumptions?

5. Systems thinking

You cannot understand the whole by examining the parts. Stand back and look for the big picture and then look for how all the parts are connected. Everything is connected. Everything is in relationship. Describe the connections and the nature of the relationships. Here’s a very simple test; the next time you have to solve a problem say, “the problem is never the problem” see where that takes you.

6. Create a thought distraction

Sometimes you have to create a “thought distraction” to get out of a thinking rut. Drive a different way to work, change your routine, read different books or learn a new skill.

7. Exercise

Your brain is less than 3% of your body weight yet consumes 30% of your oxygen intake. Aerobic fitness is essential for good thinking. Quality thinking seldom happens sitting in the office. Go for a walk, get some air and you will be amazed at the thoughts that come.

8. From knowledge to learning

Chances are you already know more stuff than you’ll ever put into practice. The issue is not your knowledge but your learning. Do you have an insatiable appetite for learning? Would you describe your workplace as a learning organisation? Learn something new!

9. Read

How can you expect to come up with some new ideas if you don’t read? Read widely, not just the latest titles. Venture into areas outside your current sphere of interest. Try some philosophy, poetry, history, quantum physics, spirituality or neuroscience. You may say, “I don’t have time to read” I’d say, “You don’t have time not to read.” Readers are leaders!

10. Creative discontent

“Every democracy which has enjoyed prosperity for a considerable period first develops through its nature an attitude of discontent towards the existing order.” Polybius, Greek Historian (200 -118 BC)

Question the status quo and imagine the possibility of a different way of being and doing.

Where to from here?

- Open up your schedule right now and block out one hour this week with the title “**thinking**”. Get out of the office and find a thinking space.
- If you would like help with putting any of these ideas into action send me an email.
- Sign up for an Executive Wilderness Retreat. This is what I do. I create a thinking space and processes that develop you as a thinking leader.

Reading list

Daniel Pink **A Whole New Mind**

Michael Le Gault **Think**

Dan Ariely **The upside of irrationality**

David Whyte **River Flow**

David Whyte **Crossing The Unknown Sea**

Margaret Wheatley **Leadership and the New Science**

Andrew Norton **Courage to Lead**

<http://www.blurb.com/bookstore/detail/3041580>

Free thinking

In busyness

the thinker is silenced,

unable to be heard over the noise of activity and response.

Thinking confined to predetermined iron tracks bolted to the ground.

Thinking waits for ...

a silence

a stillness

a space

a distraction

a clearing in the midst

of all that calls for attention.

Thinking wants to run free from iron tracks.

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