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## The Time to Think

Phil Nuernberger, Ph.D.

Call it creative problem solving, innovation, or meeting challenges, simply put, the primary task of executives is to think. Business schools and corporations expend a great deal of effort to develop effective and efficient problem solving skills, innovation and creativity. And our ability to think clearly and creatively is often a source of great pride for us.

The dictionary tells us that when we think, we exercise the power of judgment and conception, the ability to reflect and reason, the capacity to make a wiser decision. But that still doesn't tell us very much about the act of thinking. In actuality, thinking is a complex act that involves all aspects of the mind, including emotions.

For all the attention it receives, critical thinking is still only one of three forms of knowledge created by the mind.

And while you consciously decide to think about something, nearly all of the mental work of thinking is done by the unconscious mind. Just recall the last problem you solved. How much of your time was dedicated to going over past experiences, sorting out which were relevant and which were not? How much of your time was consciously spent prioritizing relevant and seemingly irrelevant data? How much time was spent consciously examining the subtle details of the problem? In truth, you spend very little conscious time doing any of this. In fact, you hardly noticed any of the subtle details.

### Experience versus Logic

Studies of problem solving by successful executives show they rarely follow the complex steps and practices taught in business schools. One study

contrasted the problem solving strategies of MBA students and experienced effective executives. The graduate students did what they were taught in their classes. They organized and prioritized the data, and eventually came to a solution. More often than not, it was the wrong solution.

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On the other hand, the experienced executives went quickly through the data, barely paying attention to the details. They sat thoughtfully for a few moments and then accurately solved the problems, relying on their experience, instincts and insights, all of which are aspects of their unconscious mind.

The unconscious mind is a vast storehouse of knowledge. The power of the unconscious mind lies in its ability to organize and prioritize that knowledge without our conscious effort. This storehouse of knowledge and experience is the foundation for critical thinking, one of three forms of knowledge in the mind. Critical thinking involves both the sensory dimension of the mind (and the functions of habit, emotion, perception, language that operate within the sensory dimension) as well as the power of discrimination, the mind's capacity to discern cause/effect relationships.

### The Three Ways to Know

But critical thinking is only one of three forms of knowledge created by the mind. The others, instinct and intuition play significant and key roles

in creative problem solving. Effective executives rely on their intuition and instincts to find creative solutions to problems, and then justify their decisions with logic. They know how to trust the tremendous organizing capacity of their unconscious mind as well as its ability to penetrate the subtle nuances of problems and recognize solutions not seen by the conscious mind.

Instinct is the mind's capacity to recognize what in our immediate environment will either help us or hurt us. A function of our sensory mind, instinct is based on subtle, even subliminal, sensory events. Intuition, however, is based purely on the mind's power of discrimination, the recognition of subtle cause/effect relationships. It is free from the limits of time/space and pain/pleasure that characterize sensory input. These two powerful forms of knowledge are subtle, and for most, function entirely within the unconscious mind.

### Using the Whole Mind

In any problem solving situation, the entire unconscious mind is busy processing and categorizing sensory input, accessing past experiences and knowledge and exploring relevancy, discerning subtle relationships, checking out danger and opportunity, responding to emotional issues, being structured by beliefs and attitudes - the list goes on. In short, the entire mind becomes involved in high speed data acquisition, retrieval, synthesis and output. We are aware of only a tiny part of the enormous activity that goes on.

In creative problem solving, we use all three sources of knowledge. We use

intuition to discern subtle cause/effect relationships not evident in the sensory data. We use instinct to know when to move and when to stay still. We rely on the organizational capacity of the unconscious mind and its monumental capacity for retrieving and organizing data to key in pertinent details and facts.

#### **The Role of Conscious Mind**

The conscious mind plays a small but critical role that can be refined to a high degree of skill. The conscious mind is like the lens of a camera. It inputs data and focuses attention. Just as a camera lens focuses light (and the details in the light) on the film, conscious attention feeds data into the complex functions going on in the unconscious mind. The clarity and power of this lens (conscious mind) is determined by our power of concentration. The more concentrated we are, the more effective we are at inputting data into the creative matrix of our unconscious mind.

**Crisis management is a poor medium for critical thinking.**

By training the conscious mind, we can have a powerful impact on the unconscious. The logic and problem solving courses help refine our power of discrimination as well as teach us how to minimize certain kind of errors. But they do little for the unconscious functions involved in the thinking process.

It is important for us to be skilled in our ability to focus our conscious mind and minimize any distractions so the unconscious can do its work without interference. When we distract ourselves with emotional reactions, become occupied with trivia, or determined to hang on to our beliefs, we interfere with concentration and have difficulty thinking. The more problems we create for ourselves to solve, the busier and more cluttered our unconscious mind becomes. Past emotional hurts are just as much of our history, and impact the play of the unconscious as much as work and educational experiences.

#### **Four Steps to Enhance Critical Thinking**

There are four simple steps we can take to help our unconscious mind become more effective.

\* **Create a calm and quiet mind:** a number of factors cloud out thinking in such subtle ways that we aren't aware that it's happening. Most of us realize that strong emotional reactions interfere with our ability to think clearly. But more subtle fears, self-doubt and other emotions all create interference patterns for the unconscious well below our level of awareness. A relaxed and calm mind minimizes these interference patterns and facilitates discrimination.

\* **Take time to ponder.** Don't make critical decisions in the midst of emotional reactions. Crisis management is a poor medium for critical thinking. Time pressures exist for all of us, but we can always find a few moments to clear our mind, and allow ourselves the time and space to ponder the question. The more important the decision, the more important reflection becomes. This provides an opportunity for the unconscious to bring about the full play of its organizational and discriminatory powers.

\* **Absorb yourself in the project.** The more focused and engaged you are, the greater your power of discrimination. Positive absorption, free of worry, allows the unconscious mind to become totally involved in the problem-solving process. Once you have invested time and effort, step back and trust your unconscious mind to solve the problem for you.

\* **Examine any and all answers your mind gives you.** Beliefs, desires, expectations, needs and wants can create barriers in the creative matrix of your mind. The stronger they are, the more they distort your analytic abilities. Be willing to challenge your beliefs.

Explore the novel ideas and solutions that your mind presents. When you think you already know what is possible or not, what should or should not be, you circumvent the power of discrimination and inhibit creativity. Our best performance and our best thinking is done in a relaxed but alert state with an open and receptive awareness.

We can become more effective problem solvers by using both the conscious and unconscious mind more effectively. It takes a little time and practice, but the benefits are well worth the effort, and the possibilities are endless!

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#### **Mind Food**

The greatest hindrance to knowledge is our adjustment to conventional notions, to mental cliches.

- Abraham Joshua Heschel

Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time; the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to oppression and violence.

Man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.

- Martin Luther King

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of true art and science.

- Albert Einstein

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