DAN
PONTEFRACT
Best-selling author of Flat Army and The Purpose Effect

open
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think

SLOW DOWN,
THINK CREATIVELY, AND
MAKE BETTER DECISIONS

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Dan Pontefract | Figure 1 © 2018

Citing the title of Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" as an example of something people think they know but often get wrong, consultant Dan Pontefract offers a strategy for thinking more clearly and making better decisions. As he explains how his "dream, decide, do" system works, he provides real-life examples of "open thinkers" whose accomplishments stem from their deliberative cognitive practices. People tend to rush to conclusions, accept misinformation, skip nuance or trust shallow assumptions. Instead, Pontefract says, pause to ponder. The effectiveness of your thought process depends on how well you sort evidence, reflect upon it and challenge your conclusions. *getAbstract* recommends Pontefract's manual to those who'd like to make better decisions or gain useful insight into their own thought processes.

Take-Aways

- People and organizations often leap to conclusions and make decisions without careful consideration.
- An "open thinker" takes time to reflect, weigh evidence and reach informed conclusions.
- Open thinking balances "reflection and action."
- Open thinkers use creative, critical and applied thinking.
- They question everything and remain receptive to new ideas.
- Open thinking has three aspects: "creativity, judgment" and "action."
- Creativity depends on careful deliberation and bold ideas.
- Judgment requires informed reasoning, analysis and decision making.
- Take action only after you apply thoughtful consideration to solving problems and making decisions.
- As an open thinker, include time to dream, decide and do every day.

Summary

Pause to Reflect

Today, people are busier than ever. They have little time to do anything well – including the vital process of thinking things through. For many people, clear thinking is an increasingly rare commodity. People don't always get around to the necessary steps of thoughtfully weighing their options, building expertise and reaching their own reasoned conclusions to solve problems and make decisions. Some outsource their creative and critical thinking to Alexa, Siri or Wikipedia. Closed thinkers are unwilling to open their minds to new ideas. They seem to think it's more convenient to go through life shut off from new information and ideas. Too many organizations also function in a close-minded way.

> *"When we think, we are using our mind to actively form or connect an idea…Thinking is also an approach, a possibility, a deliberation, an opinion, or an attitude. It can even be a belief or a conclusion."*

Many people and companies need to adopt a new thought process to build their decision making skills and agility. This improved system of thought – open thinking – is "a holistic approach of reflection, decision making and action to secure an ethical outcome." Open thinking calls for careful consideration, for taking action through a process of "dreaming, deciding and doing." With open thinking, you work through an issue, weigh the evidence, decide how to resolve it and then take the necessary action. Open thinking is iterative, inclusive, contemplative and interrogative. It's deliberative, not automatic or reflexive.

"Reflection and Action"

Open thinking balances reflection and action. If these elements don't align, three bad habits can take hold:

1. **"Indifferent thinking"** – Habit traps people into staying with their current methods and thought processes no matter how self-defeating.
2. **"Indecisive thinking"** – Those who have a hard time making decisions constantly muddle over what to do or not do. They fall prey to "endless dreaming," a state of mind that strategic management expert H. Igor Ansoff calls "paralysis by analysis."
3. **"Inflexible thinking"** – Many people are uncomfortable consciously thinking about what they believe or the actions they're going to take. They avoid analyzing their own processes and just plunge ahead. They "choose activity over a weighted blend of ideation, pause, consideration and response…The act of doing becomes the most important thing."

Welcome New Ideas

Open thinkers remain receptive to new ideas and information from a wide variety of sources. They welcome innovative concepts and view accepted dogma with skepticism. Open thinkers move beyond what they know. They acknowledge what they don't know, and they're willing to learn. They pursue discovery even if the new knowledge might upset them or blast apart their current world view. To determine if you should incorporate open thinking into your way of handling information, conducting analysis and making decisions, ask yourself three questions about the way you think now: Do you devote sufficient time to "reflecting and dreaming?" Do you rely on verifiable data to make decisions? And, do you take the time required to do things properly? Open thinking has three core elements:

1. "Creative Thinking"

Creative thinking covers "ideation and reflection," which lead to better ideas. Mythologist Joseph Campbell became famous for his detailed, insightful discussion of cultural archetypes. His most notable example is the "hero" – the inspiration for the Luke Skywalker character in the Star Wars film franchise. Campbell gave himself time to reflect deeply, dropping out of grad school to travel and think before producing his classic, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

> *"Thinking – like eating – is something we all do. In fact, we are all constantly thinking. But as with eating, there are both healthy and unhealthy habits."*

Open thinkers are willing to "wander" and take the time they need to think things through. Taking time to think means making time for daydreaming, an essential component of creativity. When you dream, you stop and observe. You spend time thinking. Daydreaming helps you figure out new solutions and processes. For an aspiring or practicing open thinker who wants to pause and reflect, time becomes the most valuable commodity. Don't exploit your time – as most organizations want you to do. Explore it. Set up a quality time-management system to protect your time. Don't overly commit yourself. Free up your day as much as possible. When you can, farm out nuts-and-bolts tasks to people on your team. Move your focus from the minutiae to the big picture.

2. "Critical Thinking"

Critical thinking centers around analysis and judgment; it generates better decision making. Everyone has cognitive biases that get in the way of clear and logical thinking. Learn your biases, and compensate for them. Challenge your thinking and the conclusions you reach. Seek new ideas and information. Welcome opposing or nonconforming opinions.

> *"Better thinking is hard, not easy. Better thinking takes time, not haste. There is no shortcut."*

Collaborating with your colleagues helps promote open thinking. Ask people you trust and respect for their suggestions and advice. The more people you involve in your decision making, the better your decisions will be – within limits. As you think through new approaches and concepts, realize that failure isn't a negative for people or organizations if you and your company evaluate your mistakes. Failure can have value as a learning experience. It can help you diagnose where your personal or corporate critical thinking may have gone off the rails. To make the most of daily processes and activities, as well as successes or failures, organizational leaders must be open thinkers who understand the crucial leadership qualities that go into critical thinking.

3. "Applied Thinking"

Applied thinking means acting on your decisions. Applied thinking actualizes your "commitment to execute a decision." It doesn't focus on "what" to do, but on "how" to do it. To get the results you want, the "how" always counts. Set clear goals everyone on your team can understand. To inspire your colleagues to develop their own solutions, support the solutions they suggest and implement them in a process of planned action. Demonstrate your empathy and understanding about their struggle to find those solutions. Because external conditions will change constantly, remain flexible and supportive.

> *"Our senses are bombarded daily by political propaganda and fake news. We fluctuate between high filtering and gullibility. The truth is becoming harder and harder to discern."*

Don't assume your applied-thinking solutions will always work well or smoothly. They won't. Expect snags along the way. In any thoughtful endeavor, "hiccups and curve balls" come with the territory. Avoid letting your organization become a "factory of actions." Keeping everyone looking super busy all the time may generate a veneer of efficiency, but busywork isn't efficient. You want your employees to be thoughtful in their actions. That can't happen when everybody is moving 100 miles an hour. Help your employees and colleagues focus on the long term, not the short term.

Applied Thinking at Your Organization

As you exercise applied thinking, "be ruthless about the long term." Yes, you must accomplish things today, but don't get seduced by the apparent success of constant action. You may, by reflex, want to prioritize immediate actions, and you must stay vigilant about the short term, but always ask how what you do today will affect your core purpose and the shape of your future. To keep a close watch on the short term while staying aware of the long term, refine your in-house organizational practices, such as "calender etiquette" and managing time. Recognize that information and processes will become obsolete, sometimes more rapidly than you can imagine. So while you must accept mistakes, the way you respond to these inevitable aspects of doing

business will highlight the efficacy – or lack of efficacy – in your applied-thinking. Build an agile, resilient, tolerant culture; avoid rigid thinking.

Open Thinker: Chef Peter Gilmore

Australian executive chef Peter Gilmore plans and supervises meal preparation at two award-winning restaurants in Sidney, Australia: the Quay and Bennelong. The way he works exemplifies open thinking. He applies "creative visualization" when he plans a new dish, meal or menu. During this stage, he eschews practicality because it would limit his thinking, yet he never forgets that the dishes he dreams up must become workable menu items. He balances reflection and action. His dishes embody open thinking's dreaming, deciding and doing aspects.

> *"The greatest barrier in our society is a lack of genuine dialogue and critical practice." (Lisa Helps, mayor of Victoria, British Columbia)*

To retain his emerging ideas, Gilmore writes everything down. He tests new recipes, moving among creative, critical and applied thinking. Gilmore depends on collaboration with his kitchen team to develop, formalize and finalize all aspects of a dish. He documents the preparation process and the cost of new dishes. He works out how to explain them to the front-of-house team and helps the waiters describe the "emotion and intent" of a new dish to clients. Gilmore's kitchens function as testing and proving grounds for open thinking.

"10 Essential Guidelines for Open Thinking"

Follow these 10 principles to exercise open thinking:

1. Allow yourself plenty of time to think clearly and comprehensively. Never rush your thinking. Open thinking is a "slow thinking movement."
2. Too much thinking, rethinking and re-rethinking can become self-defeating. So can too much collaboration. After careful thought and conversation, move ahead decisively.
3. Never take action just to take action. Be thoughtful about what you do and decide what not to do.
4. Be flexible in your thinking. Let knowledge shape your ideas and opinions.
5. Write down your best thoughts. Idea flow is a continuing resource.
6. Be systematic and organized in everything you say and do. Scatterbrains are ineffective thinkers and planners.
7. You can't be creative if you're always busy. Take breaks to refresh yourself and create time for new ideas to emerge.
8. Dig for information to enable proper analysis and informed decision making. Never be hasty. Don't settle for insufficient data. Lisa Helps, mayor of Victoria, British Columbia, thinks people often leap to premature conclusions after reading "three things on Facebook." She faces each situation ready to take in meaningful information.

9. Maintain your focus. Don't succumb to time-wasting distractions.
10. As an open thinker, include time to dream, decide and do every day.

Agility and Flexibility

Open thinkers stay flexible and adaptable. Dion Hinchcliffe, chief strategy officer at 7Summits – an online solutions provider – says to try new ideas if old ones don't work. He developed a five-step system for flexible problem solving:

1. Develop an idea or solution.
2. Try your idea. Experiment. If you fail, fail quickly.
3. Make the most refined decision possible. Continue to problem solve.
4. If you can't find a solution, put the current problem on the shelf. Focus on a new problem and try to solve it instead.
5. Maintaining a cycle fuels flexibility. Be ready to return to the original problem.
   This process educates you continually.

> *"The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn." (futurist Alfred Toffler)*

John Dalla Costa, founder of Toronto's Centre for Ethical Orientation, says open thinkers have three traits:

1. **"Courage"** – Open thinkers connect with new ideas, even if those ideas run counter to their current worldview.
2. **"Responsibility"** – Open thinkers accept new, verifiable information and welcome new data that move them closer to an ultimate truth.
3. **"Fairness"** – Open thinkers know investigation and experimentation often involve mistakes, which can be the greatest teachers of all.

About the Author

Dan Pontefract is the "chief envisioner" at TELUS – a Canadian telecom company – where he heads the Transformation Office, a future-of-work consulting group. He also wrote *Flat Army* and *The Purpose Effect*.

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