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Learning to Think

It has been said that everyone must possess three transferable skills – the ability to speak, the ability to write, and the ability to think. The most elusive of these three is probably the ability to think. Unfortunately, many organizations prevent people from thinking. For example, a lack of consistent standards throughout the entire organization may contribute to wide variations in results, making it difficult for people to make the right decisions. Many companies are plagued with compliance type thinking; i.e. people "go along" with decisions to avoid retribution, not challenging the bad decisions that are about to be launched. Instead, we need a simple and consistent framework for decision-making that allows everyone to think the way they need to think. In their landmark book BusinessThink, Dave Marcum, Steve Smith, and Mahan Khalsa have outlined eight standards that define a common framework for organizational thinking. Here are some quick excerpts:

1. Stop rushing to implement solution after solution. Instead, focus on the real sources of the problem so that results, not some solution unfolds. For example, make sure you define the problem accurately before launching some major project.

2. Make sure you have hard evidence that a problem really exists. For example, you may want to measure the issue just to substantiate the problem and determine the extent of the problem.

3. Don't forget to quantify your solution through some form of analysis such as a business case that considers all the angles. The true costs of launching a solution may exceed the costs of simply ignoring the problem.

4. Get to the root cause of the problem. Many companies put out fires or plug leaks in the organization without drilling down to the source. Eliminate the source and stop treating the symptoms.

5. Allow people to explore and let them be "nosey" into things that may not be their business. By giving people this opportunity to make inquiries into new things, change becomes easier to implement for the organization. In fact, by letting people penetrate new territories, you open up more possibilities, leading to change.

"Those who get curious often get it right – no matter what – and this leads to tangible competitive advantage." – BusinessThink by Dave Marcum, Steve Smith, and Mahan Khalsa

Thinking is about understanding people and removing organizational impediments that force people to act and behave outside their norm. Thinking is about equalizing everyone so that it no longer matters where the idea comes from, just as long as we get the right idea. Thinking is about going through some form of due diligence before committing organizational resources.

Too often organizations resist these "reality checks" because of management egos. And according to Jim Collins, author of Good to Great, management egos are one of the single biggest reasons that good companies never make it to great.

At a time when most businesses are struggling and failing, and at time when more and more people are becoming increasingly independent and entrepreneurial in their thinking, the time has arrived for all organizations to learn to think. Organizations must put people in charge within a single and simple framework that makes good business sense. And by making this framework for decision-making simple, people will be able to execute.