

AS THE LEADER THINKETH

BY GREGG THOMPSON

*This article is dedicated to the wonderful men and women who have not read the latest bestseller on leadership but still get up each morning committed to making a real difference in the work, careers and lives of others.

There is a hard truth about leadership development that many practitioners in this field prefer to ignore: Much of the work done promoting a particular set of leadership practices or competencies is for naught because it fails to influence the leader's thinking. It falls on deaf ears. Workshop facilitators and leadership coaches may as well save their breath to cool their porridge because any behavioral changes are short-lived unless there is a sustained change in the way the leader thinks. In fact, there is so much focus on practices and competencies these days that we neglect the leader's mind and it is from here that all great leadership emanates. In 1903, James Allen wrote a remarkable little essay entitled "As a Man Thinketh" in which he encouraged the reader to seize the transforming power of thought. So profound were the ideas penned by Allen that they have been repeated by virtually every popular self-help author from Dale Carnegie to Stephen Covey, from Norman Vincent Peale to Daniel Goleman. Allen asserted that people have the power to shape themselves (essentially, their character and motivation) by being disciplined and intentional in their thoughts. His was a message of hope and optimism in a time of strife and hardship. Leaders have much to learn from Allen's message.

Thinking and Leadership

This is a very simple, straightforward concept, yet one many leaders would rather ignore. *Good thinking creates good leaders and bad thinking creates bad leaders!* No rocket science here. This is easy to understand but pretty tough for many leaders and leadership development practitioners to accept. It is so much neater to define leadership as a predetermined list of practices and competencies. The truth is, however, that leaders create or diminish themselves by their thoughts.

Leadership is an acquired habit that flows directly from repetitive thoughts. For example, the more you think about the value of creativity and diverse ideas, the more you will be an effective leader of innovation. A leadership habit starts with a thought, then becomes a choice, then a practice which becomes a permanent part of your repertoire (i.e. your leadership). This is how leaders create themselves. A repetitive thought ultimately results in a new leadership practice...for better or for worse!

(It is important to note that I am not advocating the self-centered "If I think it, I will get it" concept promoted in the book entitled *The Secret* but rather am suggesting that, to increase their effectiveness, leaders need to adopt an "If I think it, I will do it" approach.)

Are your thoughts your ally or your enemy?

- What are your thoughts about your organization? Do you think about it as a chaotic, messy institution or a diverse, creative community?
- What are your thoughts about leadership? Do you think about it as an entitlement to power, privilege and wealth or as a calling to serve others?
- What are your thoughts about others? Do you think of them as flawed pawns on your chessboard or as wonderfully gifted and unique partners?
- What do you think about your work? Do you think of it as an inescapable chore or as a way to live out your purpose and legacy?
- What are your thoughts about the future? Do you think about it as a road lined with countless perils and menacing enemies or as a once-in-a-lifetime adventure?

Cultivating Leadership Thought

Think of your mind as a garden. What are you cultivating? Allen asserts that *"A man's mind may be likened to a garden, which may be intelligently cultivated or allowed to run wild; but whether cultivated or neglected, it must, and will, bring forth."* Leaders who refuse to change their thinking are refusing to grow. I find it particularly sad to see leaders who invest a herculean effort into improving their organization (and everyone in it) but refuse to change themselves.

If they are being truthful, most leaders will admit that much of their daily effort is directed at trying to change others or accommodate their behavior. They are missing the point. As a leader, when you change the way you think, others will change the way they act! This is one of the most difficult lessons for anyone seeking to enhance their leadership. It all starts in your head! These leaders fail to recognize that all organization development starts with leadership development...and they cannot improve their leadership without improving their thinking. The cool thing about this is that we, as humans, have the wonderful capacity to change our thinking. We are the masters of our own minds. I recognize that the deepest levels of our consciousness may be hardwired, but we are the authors of our day-to-day thinking patterns. Our thoughts are the source of our power.

Allen goes on to say that *"If no useful seeds are put into it, then an abundance of useless weeds will fall therein, and will continue to produce their kind."* So how can the leader keep his or her mind weed-free? You need to be ever vigilant for the most toxic varieties: jealousy, spite, envy, entitlement and judgment... and rip these out before they take hold of your mind and diminish your leadership. We all have these weeds. Leaders who allow them to flourish are choosing a path towards distrust and weakness. The diligent gardener is rewarded with respect and admiration.

As a leader, what are you feeding your mind? And what seeds are you planting to create these new thinking patterns? Valuable seeds can be found everywhere; a great book, a rich conversation, a challenging coach, a quiet contemplation...the world is brimming with good seeds for the leader and not-so-great seeds. Are you stimulating your mind with Plato or with Angry Birds?

Leadership Character

Allen wrote: *"The wise man, by adding thought to thought and deed to deed, buildeth his character."* As much as we try to hide it, others have a pretty good idea as to what we are thinking. A leader cannot not act, in the long run, according to his or her thinking. Thoughts will be revealed through actions. A leader's character is always on display. For example, how many times have you seen a newly-minted leader lather profuse compliments on their team members only to be met with ambivalence and disdain? The team members are likely thinking "Do you think so little of me that you believe you can buy my loyalty and best work with shallow flattery?" The leader would do better to spend time in serious thought considering the wonderful talents and work of each team member, and in doing so, develop a sincere appreciation for each. Following this reflection, a simple, sincere "Thank you for being a part of this team. I am honored to be your partner." will light up a lot of eyes and lift a lot of spirits.

To the leader who aspires to greater things, I will leave you with this thought: Your current thinking has brought you this far. What new thinking will create the leader you wish to be?



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