

MAXWELL MOMENT**Thought Busters**

by Dr. John C. Maxwell

The power of thought is indisputably great. For illustration, look at the life of Henry David Thoreau, a 19th-century Massachusetts philosopher.

In 1849, Thoreau, as a relatively unknown scholar, published his thoughts in a controversial essay about civil disobedience. The essay expressed his ideas about justice:

- Not all laws are just.
- A person should respect justice more than the law.
- Without resorting to violence, a person of conscience is justified to transgress the law to protest its injustice.

Thoreau's thoughts, as the basis for nonviolent resistance, would end up fueling two of the greatest social advancements of the 20th century - Ghandi's struggle to free India from Britain's colonial rule and the American Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr.

THOUGHTS ABOUT THINKING**Thoughts never begin fully formed.**

Have you ever looked through a microscope? At first glance, the image appears blurry and indistinct. However, after adjusting the lens, the image comes into focus, and you can see with remarkable clarity.

When thoughts enter my mind, they are hazy and disordered, much like the initial image seen through a microscope. I have to fine-tune my thoughts by dwelling upon them, and connecting them to other thoughts I've had. It takes awhile for me to wrestle with a thought before its merit becomes clear.

Thoughts take time to develop their potential.

I am not a naturally brilliant thinker. My mind doesn't overflow with out-of-the-box creativity. However, I do leverage experiences to stretch my thoughts. I have found that reflection turns my experience into insight. At the close of each day, I'll review important lessons I've learned. I'll mine failure until I've gained a nugget of wisdom, or I'll consider how the day's events validated or invalidated one of my ideas. Through time, evaluating my experiences helps my thoughts to expand and mature.

Thoughts take others to develop their potential.

Alone, my thoughts are shallow and unexceptional. However, I am able to polish and refine them through my interactions with other leaders. I enhance my own thinking by piggybacking on the wisdom of friend and colleagues. In conversations or observations of their behavior, I strengthen and confirm my own inklings about leadership and life.

Each of us is trapped inside our own perspective and limited by blind spots and prejudices. If we isolate ourselves, we diminish our minds, and our thoughts atrophy.

We are wise to seek out others to test our assumptions and sharpen our thinking.

Thoughts are very fragile in the beginning.

Gardeners know the delicate nature of a newly planted seedling. To survive, the plant must receive nourishment and be protected from harsh winds, weeds, or hungry animals. Until its roots take hold and its stem grows, the seedling is vulnerable.

Likewise, our thoughts are fragile at first. They are endangered by pessimism, busyness, insecurity, forgetfulness, and a host of other threats. In the words of Bob Biehl, "Ideas are like soap bubbles floating in the air close to jagged rocks on a windy day."

In order to grow, our thoughts need careful attention and cultivation.

THOUGHT BUSTERS

Thoughts only reach their potential in a healthy environment. During my time as a leader, I've encountered the following environmental hazards, or thought busters, which threaten to destroy good thinking.

Criticism

When leaders pay any cost to ward off criticism, they sacrifice their best thoughts. In the words of Elbert Hubbard, "If you have something others don't have, know something others don't know, or do something others aren't doing, then, rest assured, you will be criticized." In my opinion, thinking requires boldness, the courage to be second-guessed, and readiness to endure conflict.

Lack of personal commitment to thinking

Taking action is by no means a negative quality in a leader. However, when a leader is all action, it's only a matter of time until he or she falls behind, steers off course, and surrenders the reins of leadership. I like Gordon MacDonald's appeal to mental fitness:

"In our pressurized society, people who are out of shape mentally usually fall victim to ideas and systems that are destructive to the human spirit and to the human relationship. They are victimized because they have not taught themselves how to

think, nor have they set themselves to the lifelong pursuit of growth of the mind. Not having the faculty of a strong mind, they grow dependent upon the thoughts and opinions of others."

As leaders, thinking keeps us in front. Before we shape the future, we must get our minds in shape.

Excuses

"I don't have enough time," has been my most common excuse to avoid thinking. However, blaming time constraints is not a legitimate excuse. After all, a great idea is one of the greatest commodities a person can own. Besides, by taking the time to think, we invent smarter ways to expend our energy and resources.

"I'm not creative," has been another excuse of mine. Of course, blaming my lack of creativity is actually a sorry excuse for being lazy. Thinking well isn't easy. It takes concentration, focus, and, most challenging of all, the discipline to stop moving for a few moments.

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LEADERSHIP@LARGE

Criticism That Counts

Americans have a warped view of criticism. Unfortunately, most of us see criticism almost exclusively in a negative light. We dish it out tactlessly, use it to tear down rivals, and attack others with it even when we have no authority to do so.

It certainly doesn't help that we are inundated with poor examples of criticism in the media. For starters, consider *American Idol's* British judge, Simon Cowell. It's not uncommon for Simon's scathing criticisms to elicit tears from contestants. His words are given sincerely, but heartlessly. Watching Simon, it's as if he relishes finding faults in another's imperfections.

Election season paints another ugly picture of criticism. Politicians wield it like an ax to cut down their opponents. Instead of debating ideas in a civil forum, too often politicians lower themselves into a mudslinging contest.

Another media avenue, the blogosphere, has become criticism central in America. Bloggers attack the character of leaders they don't know and rail against decisions made in circumstances they could never understand. Far too frequently, their inflammatory tone escalates conflict without adding any substantial value to the interplay of ideas.

CRITICISM DEFINED

Given the less than stellar models of criticism prevailing in society, we need a healthy definition of criticism along with practical guidance for giving and receiving it. In an April 1st article for *BusinessWeek*, Dr. Bruce Weinstein gives us exactly that. Here's how he describes the value of criticism:

"The goal of true criticism is to help someone be the best they can be...When criticism is done appropriately, the person who has been criticized will understand what he or she has done wrong and will feel inspired to make a change for the better. Not only should we not avoid being criticized, we should embrace criticism because it is the only way we can continue to grow professionally and personally."

The following practical tips are intended to flesh out the ways we can begin to embrace and wisely employ criticism as leaders.

WHEN GIVING CRITICISM

Encouragement helps criticism to land.

Before a pilot lands an aircraft, she goes through a series of procedures to make the plane touch down as smoothly as possible. The pilot gently drops altitude, gradually cuts back on speed, and lowers landing gear at just the right moment. If these steps are handled incorrectly, the ride is certain to be turbulent and may end up in disaster.

For criticism to "land" well, it must be preceded by encouragement. Leaders deafen their people to criticism when they neglect to encourage them regularly. If leaders are silent after victory but outspoken during defeat, then team morale plummets. It's difficult to stay open to suggestions for improvement under what feels like a constant barrage of negativity.

Criticism should avoid being personal

Criticism should avoid being personal, but it should have the support of a personal relationship. To prevent personal insult, leaders should carefully pinpoint specific actions or ideas to criticize. People can accept negative feedback of their performance, but they bristle when they feel their personhood is under attack.

Leaders effectively deliver constructive criticism when they have taken the time to acquaint themselves with those they lead. Without relational connection, the person receiving criticism may feel their leader has a personal vendetta against them. However, if they are convinced their leader respects their efforts and values their growth, they are more likely to be receptive to tough words.

WHEN RECEIVING CRITICISM

Selectively filter criticism

The higher up a person goes in leadership, the more criticism he or she will receive—guaranteed. While some criticism builds up, other criticism tears down. Leaders must learn to distinguish between the two.

The acid test of criticism is made up of three questions:

1. Does the criticism have basis in fact?
2. Is the criticism offered constructively (in an effort to help)?
3. Does the critic have the insight and perspective to speak credibly?

When all three questions can be answered, "yes," then a leader should take the criticism seriously and weigh its meaning. If any question can be answered, "no," then a leader is best served to let the criticism go in one ear and out the other.

Avoid Extremes

A leader who routinely dismisses criticism chokes off vital feedback. When leaders ignore or suppress opposing views, they miss the opportunity to sharpen their ideas. Wise leaders want to be challenged, not coddled. They surround themselves with voices that speak what they need to hear instead of saying only what they want to hear.

On the other extreme, leaders with thin skin are rattled by all manner of criticism. They agonize over the opinions of people whose input is uninformed and unintended to be helpful. They allow second-guessing to cut into their confidence. Ultimately, such a leader cede authority by subjecting their decision-making to the approval of outsiders.

Listen, Listen, Listen

Sincere criticism rarely comes without a morsel of truth. For a leader, the trick is to stay open when confronted with negative feedback. When criticized, people are tempted to react defensively, angrily, or from a place of hurt. With emotions swirling about inside, it can be difficult to keep listening and to absorb critical comments.

Those who gain the most out of criticism hold their tongue and control their emotions in order to gain access to hard truths. By listening and remaining objective, they grow increasingly self-aware and improve their leadership.

For more advice on addressing criticism, you can read Dr. Bruce Weinstein's BusinessWeek article, ["How to Give and Receive Criticism."](#)

Mi OPPORTUNITY

From the CEO - Looking For a Leader

Opportunity is a fun word. In my mind it is the taking on of a responsibility with the ability to receive reward for the hard work and diligence. That is what we are offering to a specific individual. A few weeks ago we listed a job posting under the title of VP, Sales. While we received some really good candidates we soon realized that we were not specific enough on what we were looking for within our companies.

Let me be clear and share a truly good opportunity for someone special. First, we have an amazing company. I know that might sound arrogant, but I really feel that way. We have a company culture that has energy, high values and creativity at our core. We get paid to motivate, inspire and impact people all day, every day. That is truly fun. Second, we are looking for a key individual that can add very positively to this culture and move the company forward rapidly as a servant leader.



Here is the clear opportunity: We are looking for a Leader of our Training Division. (I hesitate to put a title because titles don't often translate to what we want.) This person would report to the CEO. They would be responsible for a multi-million dollar division of Maximum Impact. Their chief mission would be as follows:

- Lead and manage a growing sales team
- Develop a sales strategy
- Expand our market penetration within business training
- Manage our facilitator relationships
- Enhance our brand and marketing initiatives
- Be responsible for ROI of all sales/marketing initiatives related to training
- Hire and train internal training team

My expectations would be that they are a proven leader with an outstanding attitude, history of serving others and a track record of results and good relationships. Hungry, Humble and Smart would be a good way to say it. I would hope this person has knowledge of training or leader development in some fashion and can communicate to leaders and executives.

Please contact Stacy Wood if you fit this description. Thanks.

Jeremie Kubicek, CEO of GiANT Impact

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QUOTES

Evaluation

"The only man who behaves sensibly is my tailor; he takes my measurements anew every time he sees me, while all the rest go on with their old measurements and expect me to fit them." ~ George Bernard Shaw

"True genius resides in the capacity for evaluation of uncertain, hazardous, and conflicting information." ~ Winston Churchill

"The most serious mistakes are not being made as a result of wrong answers. The truly dangerous thing is asking the wrong question." ~ Peter Drucker

"One of the great mistakes is to judge policies and programs by their intentions rather than their results" ~ Milton Friedman

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