

Thought Killers: How Leaders Lower Their Followers' IQs And What To Do About It
By
Daniel D. Elash, Ph.D.

Have you ever looked at a company and wondered how so many seemingly bright people could make such bad decisions? Or perhaps, you've sat in a meeting and knew the decision the team just made is the wrong one? These, and similar business mysteries usually can be understood through a close examination of the personal style of the leader. A leader's style can literally train his or her followers not to think. While this isn't the intention of any rational business leader, it is an unintended consequence for many.

A leader's perspective about how to lead is built from a set of assumptions. These assumptions result in a series of self-fulfilling prophecies. A leader whose management style is built upon sound assumptions and expectations will behave in ways that lead to good outcomes for the business. Conversely, a leader whose style is based upon faulty assumptions will manage a business in a way that results in deficient performance.

One common assumption held by poor leaders regards their definition of what it means to lead--- that the boss must be **the** driver of the company's success. This belief may be a holdover from the outmoded hierarchical business paradigm that designates the leader at the top of the pyramid as the person in charge of deciding and directing everything, the one who has the right answers, the deepest understanding, the best solutions. When this leader knows what the answer is, all s/he needs to do is provide the solution for people and tell them what to do; they don't need to do any thinking, just execute the orders. Even a well-meaning leader who has a passion for excellence will get into trouble when acting based upon this particular assumption, because the resulting leadership style will control and stifle the thinking of the workforce. This leader believes it's a waste of time for his workers to wrestle with problems when the answer already is known. The self-fulfilling consequence of this set of beliefs is that these workers never learn to think independently, tackle problems resourcefully, or feel any ownership for solutions, which in turn, feeds the boss' believe that she has to provide all the answers. A vicious and harmful cycle has been formed. This leader is the classic Thought Killer.

It is important to note that these thought-killing leaders usually are not bad people. Typically, they're highly committed to the success of the business and highly motivated. They become frustrated and increasingly burdened with the weight of the responsibilities that result from their leadership style. They grow angry and resentful that their people show such little motivation and can't function without constant direction. And, this vicious cycle gets even worse when the only solution these leaders can imagine is doing more of the same, namely, keeping ownership of the solution-generating process, in which they become hopelessly bogged down.

The cost of restricted thinking in the company:

In the highly competitive business environment, anything that restricts the thinking capacity of the company dulls its competitive edge. When a company accepts, however unconsciously, that there is only one real thinker on board, it becomes dysfunctional – functionally impaired. The ultimate cost paid by impaired competitors is eventually falling by the wayside.

Dysfunctional companies with restricted thinking pay a high price for their shortcomings. When you consider the price a company pays for being dysfunctional there are three broad categories that stand out:

- Costs associated with acting from a reactive posture
- Costs resulting from a cynical culture within the workforce
- Costs from an antagonistic, unfriendly attitude towards the customer

Restricted thinking in a company leads to a reactive posture. When people are focused on their internal doings, progress is measured against their typical performance instead of in relation to external standards. They don't anticipate what's happening in the world around them. They accept that things will happen to them. They don't make things happen and are not able to develop initiative, which prevents a proactive stance from developing. They become passive and reactive, rather than active and provocative.

Restrictive thinking leads to a cynical work force. It isn't just the boss who becomes angry and frustrated. People lose confidence in themselves and, by extension, in the company as a whole. Morale plummets. This lack of confidence leads to a workforce that folds under pressure. Peak performances are impossible under these circumstances.

Restrictive thinking also frustrates close customer relationships. Customers are often seen as ungrateful, unrealistic or too demanding. Customer issues are interpreted as accusations of somebody's mistakes and so are met with defensiveness or outright hostility. The company begins to expect customers to be satisfied with what the company knows how to do, rather than doing what customers want or trying to anticipate what customers will need. In this scenario, customers are actually seen as a source of frustration, as opposed to an impetus to improve.

Poor performance in any of the broad areas mentioned above can surface in many ways and is devastating. The longer a company operates dysfunctionally, the further it falls behind its competition. When the company acts as if only one thinker is allowed, intelligence gathering suffers. People just don't notice things, or when they do, they keep it to themselves. At the same time, the decision-making process becomes more rigidly hierarchical. It is slow and cumbersome, as information passes up the chain of command and decisions work their way back down. Errors and miscommunication occur at all steps in the process. Ultimately, fighting operational fires becomes the company's default posture, an inevitable result of a reactive stance. The same mistakes are doomed to be addressed over and over again as the company never develops an ability to adjust to the unexpected.

A Leaders Guide To Effective Thought Killing:

Some leaders are so effective at squashing independent thinking it's as if they are operating from a secret manual. No opportunity to restrict thinking is lost. By words and deeds, their leadership postures train the very traits that are driving them crazy. Here's how they do it.

“Don't think – do!” A leader restricts thinking by acting in ways that tell people their thinking isn't highly valued. Some variations on this theme are, “When I want your opinion, I'll give you one,” or, “You're entitled to your own misguided opinion, but do what I tell you to do anyway.” In many businesses, regardless of their size, the idea that the boss is responsible for doing the thinking still predominates. The boss knows what needs to be done, the people don't need to think about things – in fact too much thinking will just create problems. One of the fundamental assumptions of these leaders is that their people just need to do what they're told and success will follow. Then, when problems arise, when strategies aren't proven to be effective, or when unexpected circumstances emerge, the boss blames his/her direct reports for being inadequate or falling short in their responsibilities. The boss then steps in and tells people what to do, usually

without much discussion as to how we got into this fix or why this solution will work better. When people are expected not to think, they usually don't.

“Haven't you fixed that yet?” This question often results when the boss believes it's enough to simply tell people what to do. These bosses tell people what the goal is, what result is to be achieved, but don't explain the process that needs to happen to achieve the result. When collaborative thinking and doing skills are not fostered, it's inevitable that the boss will give inadequate directions, because s/he's not really providing directions, but rather, issuing directives. It's as if they're saying, “Achieve this!” not, “do these things to achieve this.” Of course, the boss believes that effective direction has been provided (“I told them what to do!”) and is frustrated and surprised upon discovering that the directive has not been achieved. In this environment, the fact that people haven't taken corrective action usually isn't realized until the lack of results is glaring. When people don't know what to do they typically wait until the boss steps in, because they've not been trained to think things through for themselves and don't know what to do to achieve the goals they've been given.

The question, “Haven't you fixed that yet?” isn't framed to determine the root cause of a delay, be it poor planning, inadequate resources to do the job, lack of required skills, or lack of necessary knowledge required for better performance. It is focused on reinforcing the idea that other people are inadequate, and making them feel bad for their poor performance. Rather than fixing anything, this question draws a defensive response from most people. In these companies, there is a lot of assigning of blame, and it flows in both directions. The typical reaction to such a question from the boss is to make an excuse, or assign blame to someone else or some other function. And, if the boss is asking this question, it is to blame others for not having been able to follow inadequate directions.

Making people feel bad is not the key to successful management; teaching them how to do what you want them to do, is.

“I could have done it better. Let me tell you what you did wrong.” Second-guessing, after the fact, is a sure way to stifle risk taking. People attack a problem only to be told later what they did wrong. Under these conditions people are unlikely to develop a sense of ownership for solving company problems. Delivered in this way, this statement leads to resentment. Sooner or later, the workforce begins to think, “If you know so much, why don't you tell us the recipe before we go down the wrong path?” In this scenario, people aren't prepared for future success. Cynicism seeps in and the trust that's necessary between leader and followers for peak performance never develops.

“I don't want to have to go through this twice; let's wait for the whole team to get here before I tell you how it should've been handled.” Often, this statement is made before staff meetings in which functional updates are given in front of the entire team. This isn't corrective feedback or collaborative problem solving; it's the ultimate humiliation. People lose face in front of their peers. They learn that it isn't safe not to have the answer or to seek feedback about ideas. They look to avoid responsibility, to hide problems, or to point fingers at others. Regardless of the stated purpose of the meeting, people work harder to avoid responsibility than they do to address problems or identify opportunities. The whole situation becomes punishing rather than constructive. Feedback can lead to improved skills, but not given in this way. It causes team dynamics to become increasingly dysfunctional. The team doesn't work together to build solutions. They don't make each other better. They simply wait, watching today's victim squirm, hoping that they aren't next, or they score points by jumping on whoever is vulnerable.

“Step back, this is important, I’d better do it myself.” You hear this message from leaders who chronically find themselves fighting fires. They often resent the fact that they are doing the work of their subordinates, but they continue to do it anyway. The message is clear: “Perhaps you people can do the routine things, but I can’t trust you with anything really important.” These leaders seldom do any actual leading, because they are too preoccupied with doing the work they pay other people to do. Meanwhile, by constantly stepping in and taking over the work of others, their people are being trained to be timid, to hang back, or even to hide evidence of an emerging crisis, hoping that somehow, something will happen to make it go away before the boss notices.

The Antidote to Thought Killing:

There is an old Chinese proverb that says, “No matter how far you have walked down the wrong road, stop!” Just as the leader’s style can restrict thinking, changing faulty assumptions, beliefs and practices can reverse the damage. A leader can learn to stimulate thinking and actually raise a company’s IQ. It’s not rocket science, but it does require one to recognize that a wrong road is being taken, stop, and do the work that’s required to lead one’s people down a more enlightened path.

Develop Your Self-Awareness:

If your company is truly populated with intellectually inferior people – replace them. However, if these people are competent everywhere but at work, then the fault lies within the context of the business environment you have created. Since our premise is that the fundamental cause of restricted thinking stems directly from the assumptions of the leader, the remedy lies in challenging and changing those assumptions. You can’t simply launch into countermeasures, because your basic assumptions, if unchanged, will ensure that whatever you try fails over time.

Reflection and introspection are not often the natural instincts of people in leadership roles. However, they are skills that must be developed because your assumptions form the lens through which you view and interpret your experiences. If the lens is faulty, your assessments will be faulty as well. If your assessments of the dynamics of situations are skewed, then your efforts to deal with those situations will miss the mark as well.

Your personality is the vehicle through which you deliver your leadership. Leadership implies a relationship; you can’t lead without people who are willing to follow. To create the best outcomes consistently, you must lead in ways that engage others to follow. Examine your leadership assumptions and assess their usefulness in unleashing the full range of capabilities in those who are following you toward the goal.

Master Self-Control:

Any leader is going to be more effective when s/he is in control of how to express emotions in a business setting. This skill is commonly described as one’s emotional intelligence, or EQ. Emotional intelligence is relevant because leadership is a role one plays in a social setting. Many people assume that they can act however they wish when they are in charge – after all, they are the bosses. This assumption is erroneous in that *how you fulfill the role* can encourage and inspire others, or it can alienate and stifle them. Effective leaders are acutely aware that their impact on people can work against their intentions. Unvarnished emotional displays (i.e., indulging emotional impulses instead of using self-control) may feel good at the moment, but usually take a toll on the workforce.

As a general rule of thumb, when one becomes angry at someone's poor performance, it is anger that should be directed back at oneself. Anger does generate a pressure that seeks release, and when you find yourself feeling anger towards an employee, it is tempting to take it out on the person who has frustrated you. However, thinking about it in light of what's been said above, poor employee performance reflects inadequate leadership. Rather than obeying the impulse to vent the anger and release the pressure, look closely at the situation and you'll find that you don't know how to get this person to do what needs to be done. *Your* attempts haven't been successful and so you *blame the other person*. If you consider the other person's position, s/he obviously lacks some requisite information or skill, or you haven't been effective in recruiting the person to the task. No matter what the cause, dumping your anger on someone seldom leads to improved thinking on his or her part. Rather than creating defensive reactions and feelings of failure in others, figure out what you need to do to help them be better prepared to achieve what you want them to do.

Pick your battles. Think of how you as the leader need to react to create the right response within the worker or across the company. Don't be insincere, but be considered and deliberate in your self-expression. Act to create the desired impact.

Communicate a Healthy Respect for People:

Leaders who restrict their peoples' thinking do not respect those people on a fundamental level. Respect for people does not imply some wishy-washy tolerance for mediocrity. The term isn't meant to suggest that you should value weak effort. Indeed, a key to unlocking the thinking skills of your people is to respect them enough to settle for nothing less than rigorous thinking on their part. Respect them enough that you refuse to settle for them delivering less than their best, everyday.

Respecting people also implies that you treat people as if they're your business partners, for that's just what they are. You and they are bound together in a complex, difficult task. In many Japanese companies operating in North America, there is a focus on the "human handling skills" of the management team. This concept is relevant here, for it is the task of a leader to handle his or her people in ways that engage their best efforts in the pursuit of challenging goals. Treating workers as if they were recalcitrant adolescents, for instance, will seldom inspire their best thinking.

Demonstrate a Commitment to Learning:

If you believe that you are the only qualified thinker in your company, you will seldom draw on the ideas and opinions of others. Freeing the people in your company to think involves creating a genuine openness to learning together. The insights and opinions of your people will become more readily available across the company if you encourage and engage in conversations about ideas. Push people to challenge your ideas. Encourage people to develop ideas outside of your presence. Get people thinking again, and reward people for doing so. Thinking is a skill that requires development, which in turn requires practice. It's true that empowering weak thinkers only leads to them developing poor solutions faster. Therefore, teaching people to think, learning from each other and then thinking together as an organization are fundamental activities for turning your company into a savvy competitor.

Moving Ahead: Are You On The Path You Want To Be On?

Take inventory of your personal style as a leader, and consider the basic assumptions that are demonstrated by how you interact with the others in your company. Do you behave in ways that encourage thought and collaboration from others, or do you find yourself making some of the thought killing statements listed above? Are you happy with the contributions your people make? Is your business as competitive as it can be?

A commitment to learning together and thinking from common perspectives are attitudes that a leader can consciously adopt. Once that decision is made, the entire company can be drawn into an on-going commitment to building the skills to deliver rigorous thinking every day.

2003 Daniel D. Elash, Ph.D. all rights reserved

Daniel Elash is a writer and business consultant focused on helping companies realize their potential. He is constantly seeking stories of ordinary business people creating extraordinary results. E-mail the author at delash@syntient.com or visit his web site www.syntient.com for further information.