MINDSET MONTHLY

Thinking Leaders
By Joanne Goh

In today's world in which we are 'connected' 24/7 through mobile technologies, we often feel the impulse and may succumb to responding to every request, call, email and message we receive immediately. We gain speed, immediate connection, and reaction. But in so doing, we give up the richer context that can only come about when we take the time to think.

Thomas Edison once said,"5% of the people think; 10% of the people think they think; and the other 85% would rather die than think."

Interestingly, these words still ring true today. A recent Harvard-UVA study on how people reflect and "engage in directed conscious thought" found that their participants typically did not enjoy spending 6 to 15 minutes in a room by themselves with nothing to do but think. They enjoyed doing mundane external activities much more. Most people prefer to be doing something, anything (even if that is something negative) rather than do nothing and think.

Leaders face the same daunting challenge. Given their roles in the organisation, top leaders have no shortage of ideas that must get implemented, problems to be addressed. Leaders need to:

1. Get the BIG Picture
To drive their team towards achieving the best results, they need to sieve out the best ideas to work on. They need to know if their big ideas will work, taking into account internal factors such as the organisational culture and capability of the team. They need to understand the external business market, and discern as to whether their ideas are relevant and sustainable. They have to see the all encompassing big picture. To do all that, they need to do reflective thinking.

2. Find Meaning
Leaders are constantly bombarded by emails, text messages, social media updates and other information. There is no way to understand the meaning of all of the information they receive unless they set aside time to think through.

In a Basex study that looked at how a typical leader spends his/her time each day, it was found that nearly a third of the time is spent in addressing interruptions by things that were not urgent or important, such as unnecessary email messages, and the time it takes to get back on track. A mere 5% is left for think time.

In order to make effective decisions, leaders must understand the meaning behind information and the implications of their decisions before action. They need to prioritise time for reflection and reflective thinking.

3. Control and Focus
Stanford research findings show that the human mind functions best when concentrating on a single task at a time. Multitaskers tend to be easily distracted and do not perform as well as those who complete one task at a time.

When alone or at meetings, leaders must fight the urge to pick up the phone or work on the computer simultaneously. Leaders need to focus on what is on hand, one task at a time. It is only then that they are likely to find themselves in control, rather than subservient to the Pavlovian urge to choose technology and connectedness over quiet reflection.

Given the complexities of today's business world, the higher up the organisational hierarchy, the more time leaders need to set aside for reflection and reflective thinking.

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