Ten Steps to Developing Agile Leaders in a Complex World

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better results through better thinking

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“Why is it so hard for our people to shift their thinking? It is so obvious to me that their thinking needs to change,” a frustrated senior line leader for a global multinational recently grumbled.

“The world has changed, why won’t they?”

Although this is nothing new—it’s a problem that has plagued managers for decades—the questions it raises today are more business critical than ever.

As the conversation evolved, we discussed all the obstacles that were getting in the way of these needed shifts in thinking. Even though these were all very smart people—dedicated, hardworking and aligned with the strategy of the company— something was missing.

“We defined the needed competencies, administered a 360, and they all heard what they needed to do to make these changes. Then we gave them training… is that not enough?” he continued, shaking his head in irritation. “I know the buck stops with me as their leader, but frankly, I am out of ideas!”

What is a leader to do?

These complaints are not specific to any one organization or country. In fact, they are products of the same underlying issues:

• An ever increasing workload with no end in sight.
• Role complexity and “bundling” with no time to adjust definition or expectations.
• Challenges leading cognitively diverse teams effectively in virtual environments.
• Lack of time for coaching, training and development, even when it is planned and budgeted for.
• Change fatigue creating an attitude of “why bother—it'll just change again anyway.”
• Business imperatives that require more risk taking and innovation when a fear of failure still pervades in the culture.
• Managing and leading up to four generations in the workplace, each of which requires a differentiated leadership style.
At the same time, the expectations—for better results, faster turnarounds, increased growth, higher customer satisfaction, competitive differentiation—aren’t decreasing. In fact, we’re demanding more.

We are up against momentous challenges, but we’re trying to tackle them with ordinary tools, often relying on the tools and processes that have worked for us in the past.

New World, Old Education?

Most leaders were educated for a different world, at least in their formal education. Younger leaders, who grew up in an environment more virtual by design and more prone to disruption and radical change, have somewhat of an advantage in acclimating to today’s business realities, but they lack experience dealing with the way large, complicated organizations function. They can be frequently frustrated by the collaborative effort required to get things done, and the moving targets of huge complex projects with continually changing or unclear milestones. That lack of experience can present a big gap they don’t know how to bridge.

More experienced leaders have the challenge of moving at the speed of information, trying to get systems and tools that were designed for other eras to work in today’s environment. They’re also saddled with what “Made to Stick”, authors Chip and Dan Heath, call a “curse of knowledge” that hinders their ability to look at fresh thinking with objectivity. In this case, knowledge and experience get in the way of their ability to flex and adapt to a new environment—to have, in a word, agility.

Jeanne Meister, author of “Workplace 2020,” recently stated in her Forbes blog, 2020 Workplace: Preparing For The Future, “In the workplace of the future, employees will increasingly need to work in small, self-organized teams and be skilled in agile management, critical thinking and virtual teaming.”

She goes on to talk about teachers she has interviewed who are training kindergarteners on how to use Twitter. One of the teachers reveals, “It’s not the technology that matters, it’s the flexibility of mind. You have to be able to say, ‘Well, OK, that didn’t work; let me try this.’ Kids are by nature that way, but this needs to be fostered.”

Kids, whose brains are still more “plastic” or adaptable than adult brains, do have the added advantage of operating in an environment that fosters mental agility. We adults need to learn to embrace thinking agility, too, as Meister goes on to describe:

“That kind of flexibility will be crucial in order to thrive in the workplace of the future. Learning and working are becoming one and the same, and agility is a major competitive advantage for companies.”

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In many ways, much of what we are asking our brains to do at work has changed dramatically. We keep changing the assignment, and yet our systems, job descriptions, learning models and platforms, baseline measures, evaluation processes, and thinking about leadership development have not kept up.

Mental Maps at Work

What is going on in our heads that either helps or impedes our mental agility? David Rock and Jeffrey Schwartz provide some insight in their article, Neuroscience of Leadership: “Cognitive scientists are finding that people’s mental maps, their theories, expectations, and attitudes, play a more central role in human perception than was previously understood.”

In the article they go into further detail about how difficult it can be to change our thinking and our way of being, since that literally requires we change our brains. This explains the mechanics behind the curse of knowledge the Heath brothers are talking about in “Made to Stick.”

Designed to be highly efficient, your brain is a pattern searching “machine.” Whenever you encounter a situation, your brain scans to see if this has been “seen” before, and if it has, it activates that part of the brain. This is why you may have a “solution” to a problem in your head before a colleague has even finished describing it. That “efficiency” has a downside, though, because it gets in the way of our ability to flex our thinking to a new place. These mental defaults can become mental blind spots-potential roadblocks to thinking agility.

The good news is we can learn to override these defaults, however, it requires that we understand and remain aware and mindful of our mental process so we can manage it rather than having our mental process manage us.

This focus is key to thinking agility, and there is a direct connection to the bottom line results organizations are looking for:

McKinsey’s Lowell Bryan and Claudia Joyce write in “Mobilizing Minds, Creating Wealth from Talent In The 21st Century Organization”, that many companies are unable to capture the opportunities of today’s global economy because they were designed using a 20th century model. Bryan and Joyce analyzed the concept of “profit per employee”, a metric that sheds light on the firm’s intangible assets that result from “thinking-intensive” work. They found that “thinking-intensive” companies – those with a large percentage of employees who must think subjectively and solve problems rather than perform well-defined tasks – are delivering staggering income, profitability and market capitalizations. These are the firms that are more adept at creating an environment where knowledge workers can translate their mind work into high-quality, high-return benefits.
The author’s research is based on a study of 1,500 companies, and found that “profit-per-employee” in thinking-intensive organizations was $30,000 more than competitors in the same industry. Based on their findings, Bryan and Joyce argue that a company with 100,000 employees could increase revenue by tens of billions of dollars by more effectively mobilizing knowledge, skills and relationships to deliver superior service to customers.

Source: Corporate University Xchange: Leadership 2012

There’s a huge “brain trust in every organization,” just waiting to be tapped, but it will require both learning professionals and leaders to break out of their mental habits and think in new ways.

The Real ROI

In this world of thinking-intensive organizations, the real ROI comes from “Return on Intelligence,” this ability to leverage and mobilize all of the thinking available to the organization. To successfully do this, leaders must be agile enough in their thinking to recognize, engage with and leverage the thinking of all those they work with, as well as to develop the ability to adjust their own thinking “on demand” as they make decisions, solve problems and engage with stakeholders.

We know from current brain research that we can shift our thinking; however, this is not a casual process, it requires a conscious awareness—often called mindfulness, as well as energy, effort and motivation. First, leaders need to understand and accept the mental biases that get in the way of their mental agility. Next, they need tools and practice stretching their thinking to meet the demands of today’s workplace.

A good example is IBM’s global leadership development program. In their Basic Blue for New leaders program, the company adopted the Whole Brain® system as a framework to both inform every new manager at IBM about their thinking preferences, and also provide a rational and clear toolkit and set of processes to understand how and why they need to shift their thinking. They don’t just learn about “thinking” in an intangible, conceptual way; instead, they learn about thinking agility in the context of their responsibilities as emerging global leaders and through the process of actually applying the tools and skills to real-life business issues.

In pointing out that IBM’s globally integrated workforce gives it a competitive advantage in serving clients, Rich DeSerio, manager of the IBM leadership development programs’ Global Design Team, explains why thinking agility is such a critical leadership competency at IBM:

“To be truly global requires that all IBMers be culturally adaptable in all its forms. This extends beyond just understanding our cultural diversity to using
this diversity to extend that competitive advantage. Whole Brain Thinking allows us to understand, appreciate, and most importantly, leverage the diversity of thought that naturally exists in our company.”

How Agile are Your Leaders?

Building leaders’ thinking agility is an essential part of the learning professional’s job today.

Patrick Cescau, then Unilever CEO, challenged an audience of management educators a few years ago with this mission: “New skills are required, new understandings. We, business, need managers and leaders with a much broader set of capabilities. You have the task to provide them.”

Our leaders need thinking agility and it starts with the learning & development and human resource functions. Re-envisioning old educational models for a new world starts with your own thinking agility as well as your ability to see the business imperative for building your leaders’ agility. Executives are looking for L&D and HR professionals who anticipate, understand and recognize the need for thinking-intensive organizations and who have the thinking agility themselves to put the necessary development systems in place. Those who can’t may ultimately become obsolete in their own jobs.

How agile is your thinking? How about your leaders? What can you do to get your organization a “thinking advantage” over the competition?

Here are 10 steps to get you started:

1. **Design with the Learner in Mind:** The first step starts with your learning design. Prepare your learners for the work required to drive a change in thinking—and help them understand their potential “curse of knowledge”—by designing in mechanisms that facilitate their ability to own and manage through their mental biases.

   For everyone, especially adults, learning takes energy, focus and motivation. The way our society works today there is a general avoidance of discomfort, with a strong desire to make things easy and more convenient. The discomfort created by asking the learner to process new information or change the way they think is often a deterrent. Yet, as my mentor Manny Elkind once reminded me, if you are not somewhat uncomfortable, then you are probably not learning! Whole brain design entails translating your content into a “tapestry of activities that will ensure critical content is better understood and retained by the varied learning styles of your audience. Use the checklist below as a guide.
In spite of 100 years of dogma saying otherwise, we now know that new neuronal connections can take place, even in the adult brain. To make sure the knowledge sticks, you have to provide context, engage emotions, introduce novelty, create meaty challenges, and provide time for processing and practice.

When you prepare the brain by providing context and making sure the design fits the learner’s needs, learners will be mentally prepared for the challenge, and even though they may still not “like” the discomfort, they can own the challenge and view learning as a victory.

2. Rethink Your Competencies: The origin of the word competency is competens, prp. of competere, meaning "sufficiency to deal with what is at hand." To keep your organization competitive you must think about the competencies that are essential for your leaders in the future and start working on them now. Too many organizations wait too long to revisit or reexamine their leadership competencies, or they focus on immediate needs rather than future needs. Here’s where your own thinking agility really comes into play.

It can be helpful to use a zero-based approach: Start with a blank page rather than reviewing what’s already on an existing list. Think about the complaints you hear from leaders, the areas where you get requests for development, and the pain points that exist in your organization.

Think out to the year 2020 and imagine how that world will be different. Now create some scenarios that describe this future state and the competencies required to best navigate it.

Global mindset is an example of a competency you might want to explore. Jeanne Meister notes, “The ability to work with individuals, teams and organizations of diverse cultures is already crucial, but will become even more important with time. The workplace is increasingly ‘global’ due to technology’s ability to shrink the boundaries of distance and time.”
Dr. Mansour Javidan of the Thunderbird Global School of Management agrees, stating that “successful executives possess a cocktail of intellectual, psychological and social attributes that enables them to influence colleagues from different backgrounds. These attributes comprise the ‘global mindset’ now heralded among forward-thinking recruiters.”

Next, create a “to-NOT-do list.” What will no longer relevant? An example is how technology has changed the role of HR in recent years from tactical to strategic, removing the need for many tactical competencies that used to be required. The move from tactical to strategic is a shift many HR leaders are now having to make, and often were not prepared for. It is imperative to be just as clear about what is not longer as important to make room for new thinking.

Start your competency work now. If you recently revised them, review them again with an eye to 2020 and see if there is anything missing, or anything that should be removed.

Finally, a pet peeve of mine is when organizations fail to set up the rationale for competency development by expressing very clearly to the learning population how this work clearly ties to the individual’s and organization’s future success. Do not overlook this critical step!

3. **Learn to Love Constraints**: Complexity brings with it a natural hierarchy of constraints which may often appear insurmountable. Leaders must be encouraged to see constraint and resistance as a challenge that provides an opportunity for new thinking. Give leaders the tools to identify and manage the constraints inherent in any situation. The key here is to identify them as clues to solving a problem instead of resisting them or trying to eliminate them as we are often inclined to do. By reframing, we can completely change our perspective and open the door to more creative options.

Some years ago I was invited to a fantastic restaurant in Brussels. Instead of ordering off the menu, you could choose the “mystery dinner” option: You described to the waiter all of the “constraints” the chef would have—in other words, the foods you did not want included in your meal. For me it was ingredients like liver and cilantro. Once the constraints were identified the chef was freed up to create a surprise meal that opened up interesting new possibilities, and delivered a delightful experience for the diners.

Many new recipes have been invented when a key product is missing and has to be replaced. Other great breakthroughs have come from similar limitations or restrictions. Stephen M. Kosslyn, the director of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, describes how we might actually need constraints to uncover creative solutions:
“Einstein had one of his major breakthroughs when he realized that time need not pass at a constant rate. Perhaps paradoxically, adding constraints can actually enhance creativity — if a task is too open or unstructured, it may be so unconstrained that it is difficult to devise any solution.”

Remember when popular language transformed the definition of the word “ba-a-d” into something meaning good? If you or your leaders tend to think of constraints as negatives, reset that mental default!

4. Use Mind Hacks to Disarm Mental Defaults. You can easily disempower the curse of knowledge by tricking the brain with novelty and mindshifters that are often called “mind hacks.” As an example, recent research has shown that people who speak a foreign language can reduce their inherent decision bias by thinking about the decision in the other language.

"A foreign language provides a distancing mechanism that moves people from the immediate intuitive system to a more deliberate mode of thinking," wrote Boaz Keysar, professor of psychology at the University of Chicago. This forces the brain to move to a more logical and conscious process, thereby eliminating the frequently instinctive emotional decision bias.

This same effect can be created even if you or your leaders don’t speak a foreign language. Have leaders step into the shoes of another role or person they know. This intentional sift will engage the brain to better decipher the issue at hand with a different perspective and bring it to mind consciously. A simple warm up technique is to ask learners to visualize their living room and imagine what an interior designer might notice about it. Next, what would a thief notice? How about a housekeeper? A real estate agent? This simple activity demonstrates how easily we can get in touch with other viewpoints. The mere process shifts our thinking.

5. Play Around with Ambiguity: The brain is always seeking clarity, so the ambiguity and the uncertainty that comes with today’s environment is very disconcerting for most leaders. Futurist Bob Johansen uses the acronym VUCA to describe the world we live in today:

Volutility
Uncertainty
Complexity
Ambiguous

All four are important and often contribute to an uncomfortable feeling for most leaders. When you learn to deal with ambiguity, it’s much easier to be agile.
The problem is we hope for and seek certainty, and that's not always realistic in an ambiguous world. It is helpful to have leaders to shift their thinking by viewing clarity as the end game, rather than hoping for certainty.

Since we need clarity but we want certainty, it is critical to help leaders realize that clarity is all you can possibly achieve. Clarity includes knowing what you do not know; certainty does not. Clarity is expressed in narratives and stories; certainty is expressed in rules and “facts.”

Focusing on the desired outcome provides clarity. Scenario planning, sometimes called stories of the mind, is the best antidote to the stress of ambiguity. Your leaders can leverage the brain’s ability to visualize by using stories to explore an array of different possible “futures.” This lets them focus on gaining great clarity about where they are going. Once that is established, a best practice used by the military is to build in great flexibility in how you get there. Getting this right will put your leaders on the road to accelerating agility!

6. Create Mindfulness Mechanisms: Mindfulness is one of those terms that seem to scare people because it appears to be an example of the “soft” in soft skills. It is, however, based on research on the brain and effectiveness. For example, multi-tasking is the antithesis of mindfulness. There is solid data that shows there can be a drop of up to 50% in productivity and memory when we multi-task. It is critical that leaders understand how the constant flow of interruptions impacts their ability to produce results. Protected “thinking time” is not a luxury; now more than ever it is a necessity and must become calendared as a task that the culture honors and understands. Taking the time to think rather than just reacting is a hallmark of agile thinkers.

Even in an age of information overload, leaders can take back control of their thinking by following a few easy-to-apply steps. Encourage leaders to:

• Quiet their mind for 5-10 minutes each day to decide what they will focus on.
• Resist the addictive and recurring “smartphone nod” that draws them to check email every 5 minutes. If something cannot wait 90 minutes for a response, then something is wrong at a deeper level: either they are not doing their job as a leader or someone else is not doing their job!
• Write down what they are hearing when listening to others to focus their brain on listening rather than drifting or other “noise” in their head.
• Sorting tasks into the kinds of mental requirements demanded by them, and then planning how they will tackle them based on energy levels and thinking preferences is a great strategy to be more productive.

These are small upfront investments in time that deliver a huge payoff, allowing leaders to rely on thinking agility instead of multi-tasking. They’ll become productive with their current responsibilities while freeing up time to increase their strategic outlook.
7. **Adopt an Experimental Mindset:** Leaders need to look at risk as a scientist would. In a recent survey we performed comparing how the academic scientific community looks at and uses assessment instruments vs. the business community, it became clear that because the inherent purpose was different, the mindset was as well. Scientists look at everything as an experiment, and this means failure is good—because it teaches us something.

An experimental mindset allows you to re-frame failure. Too often, failure becomes a limiting rather than a learning experience. The negative consequences cause people to take fewer risks going forward, and the damage can be two-fold: fewer breakthrough ideas and solutions as well as fewer opportunities to learn and grow—and reduced thinking agility.

Learning professionals need to take the lead in reframing failure to be part of the development process. It will also require shifting mindsets at a cultural level in the way people react to their own and others’ mistakes. With so much change happening right underneath our feet, we are bound to make mistakes or unwise-in-hindsight decisions. The ability to embrace, learn, adapt and bounce back from them is what thinking agility is all about.

8. **Go Diverse By Design:** Today, most organizations agree that diversity is an important objective. Yet no matter how well intentioned, diversity and inclusion (D&I) efforts often remain disconnected from day-to-day business applications and objectives. That’s because the focus is typically around compliance – an external, “have-to-do” with negative connotations – or character – an internal, feel good, “nice-to-do,” which is the kind of initiative that can quickly be cut in a difficult business climate.

Caesars Entertainment has adopted a whole new mindset around diversity, with a central focus on cognitive diversity, to create “diverse by design” teams that are tackling the critical issues of the business. Fred Keeton, Vice President of External Affairs and Chief Diversity Officer, explains why this diverse thinking is so important to the business, particularly in terms of its ability to remain agile and innovative: “For major breakthroughs, we need to create an intersection between diverse thinking, backgrounds and experiences. Diverse teams force you out of your comfort zones and out of conventions to view the world differently. When the diversity is relevant – diverse by design – and when you practice inclusion, the research has shown that you get better outcomes.”

When you bring together people with diverse cognitive toolboxes, you can help move the team towards breakthrough ideas and solutions. But leaders need to have the thinking agility and Whole Brain® perspective to effective manage that diversity of thought because if it’s not managed well, it can end up creating communication barriers and productivity problems. It’s not just about putting different perspectives together and hoping they come together for the greater good. Agile leadership skills are a key ingredient. A study with the US Forest
service demonstrated that Whole Brain® teams can be up to 66% more effective when they are well led.

9. Rev Up your Cognitive Powers By Putting the Company’s Whole Brain® to Work. Challenge your leaders to think about who they go to for feedback or advice on solving a problem. Often it’s the people who are on the same “wavelength,” those who tend to mostly validate their opinions. It’s a lot more comfortable to get validation than pushback, but those outside perspectives and different styles of thinking are often exactly what’s needed to get the best results.

Leaders have access to a wide variety of thinking, both within the company and outside it, and to be successful they’re going to have to take advantage of all of it! In a recent white paper, Future Trends in Leadership Development, Nick Petrie concluded that leaders will be most effective when a number of perspectives are compiled and integrated.

The good news for leaders is it means they aren’t “on their own” to solve problems. But they have to know what type of thinking they need for the task at hand and how to leverage it effectively. And they have to be encouraged and motivated to seek out those differing points of view.

To help leaders understand what kind of thinking and input will get the best results, IBM teaches a Whole Brain® process called “Mapping the Task” in their Basic Blue for new Leaders program to help leaders use a Whole Brain® approach when thinking about how to best tackle a given task.

It’s important to note that harnessing the best thinking includes the leader’s own thinking as well. There should be a focus on balance between leveraging the leaders’ thinking strengths with development work on challenges to overcome any mental biases and to actively seek out contrary points of view.

10. Engage Employees Head First. Leaders aren’t just dealing with their own challenges of managing through change, keeping focused, and getting more done with less. They also have to pay attention to the challenges their employees are facing.

Employees are increasingly stretched, frustrated, and ready to jump ship. A staggering 84% of employees in the US and Canada plan to look for a new job in 2012, according to a recent Right Management survey. Leaders can turn that tide and retain valuable employees and the critical skills and knowledge they bring to the organization by learning how to engage employees head first. Here are a few ways leaders can develop an engagement mindset:

- Understand the impact cognitive differences have on work approaches, motivations and performance.
- Understand the mentality of the organization’s mental assets and the mental demands of the work to be done. Armed with these insights, leaders
can ensure employees are aligned with the work they do best.

- Pay attention to what the employee pays attention to by understanding their thinking preferences, motivations and reward needs. A one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t work.

- Look beyond financial performance as the only measure of success. Leaders need to recognize the multitude of ways employees can contribute their cognitive potential, whether it’s through building customer relationships, coming up with creative ideas and solutions to problems, or improving efficiencies.

Blessing White’s Employee Engagement Report found that “employees worldwide view opportunities to apply their talents, career development and training as top drivers of job satisfaction.” Leaders play a major role in all three. Because thinking drives behavior, it gives leaders the clues and framework to focus on what will really engage, motivate and retain their employees.

Better Results Start with Better Thinking

Lee Thayer, author of “Leadership: Thinking, Being and Doing,” put it well: “Conventional ways of doing things produce conventional results.”

Conventional results are no longer sufficient for you, your leaders or your organization. In a world where competition is more and more fierce, the mental capacity of your leaders is the key differentiator, and the opportunity to expand their brain bandwidth is in your hands.

Outthink the competition before they outthink you!
better results through better thinking

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