

# Reflections

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FEATURE ARTICLE

**Insight and Wisdom**

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# Insight and Wisdom: New Horizons for Leaders

By Robin Charbit and Charles Kiefer



Robin Charbit

Organizations invest heavily in skills assessments, executive coaching, and other programs to develop leaders. Often lost in these training regimens is one of leadership's most essential tasks: expanding people's capacity for high-quality thinking. Though they're critical to the success of all organizations, we seldom stop to examine our individual and collective thought processes. In this issue,

Robin Charbit and Charles Kiefer call on us to do just that. By becoming aware of our mental states, and learning to step back and quiet the mind, we can elicit fresh thought almost at will and, the authors say, with profound results. Embedding that skill in an organization can be a leader's real legacy. Think about it.

— Paul M. Cohen, Senior Editor



Charles Kiefer

**A**n essential role of leaders is to activate the inherent intelligence and wisdom of their organizations. All leaders have seen the benefits of clear and fresh thinking in their teams and organizations, and in their own work and lives. Yet many of the leaders we speak with report that their teams rarely perform at a level equivalent to or beyond “the sum of the parts.” They have all too frequently seen bright and extraordinarily well-educated people set strategies and make decisions that yielded genuinely bad outcomes, often on the basis of what was viewed at the time as good logic.

In late 2002, we set out to see whether the application of a few simple ideas and methods could dramatically improve the presence of insight and wisdom in executive decision making. Our hypothesis was that with increased frequency, strength, and traction of insights, thinking would improve, as would the resulting decisions. Individuals and their organizations would ultimately show enhanced performance. We also expected that as insight grew in individuals, they would exhibit better personal and business judgment – what we commonly call wisdom. In this article we'll discuss the results of the first 18 months of this effort.

Everyone has had the experience of a striking insight that comes out of nowhere, yet almost instantly clarifies or resolves a seemingly intractable problem. Moments of insight can be found in the development of an enduring, unusual, and differentiated strategy, a breakthrough invention, or the commitment to a high-aspiration goal. Curiously, these insights generally occur in the shower, on vacation, while running, or on waking, but disappointingly, not during the pressure of a normal workday when they are, perhaps, most needed.

The approach we developed and tested, which we call Insight Thinking Methods (ITM), enables individuals, alone or in teams, to precipitate higher-quality insights with greater frequency and in the business setting. We applied the methods primarily to formulating business strategies and solving vexing problems that had persisted for a long time and defied previous attempts at solution. With the use of ITM, managers reported having more fresh ideas and

better business judgment. They were less likely to make mistakes, and they were more able to understand and appreciate the new ideas of others and to help others think more clearly. Breakthroughs in thought, and ultimately in business results, required only a fraction of the time and resources more typically spent.

## Outcomes of Better Thinking

A review of nearly 20 applications of Insight Thinking shows some common factors and some very agreeable business results. In many cases an insight appeared to flow directly from the application of these methods. In others, it became embedded in existing work and social processes, and results were achieved – through an enormous amount of work done by many people – using additional methods. In such cases Insight Thinking served to amplify, accelerate, and lubricate the work. The frequency of positive results is unprecedented in our experience but is unsurprising in one respect. When people improve the quality of their thinking – when they become, in effect, smarter – the effects spill over into every aspect of their work, personal lives, and relationships. In the workplace, the characteristics of Insight Thinking include:

- **Rapid Pace.** Project durations were shorter – in some cases as much as 80% – and there were a few examples of a breakthrough solution occurring during the kickoff meeting. For example, in 15 minutes the executives of a \$1-billion, food-ingredients company resolved a structural problem with their Asian joint venture that had defied solution for the previous six months. In another company, manufacturing executives created, evaluated, and converged on a new organizational structure for their several-thousand-person organization in six hours.
- **Reduced Resource Requirement.** Less money and fewer people-hours were used compared with similar efforts in the past. In one case four executives reduced the annual \$250-million R&D budgeting decision from a historically contentious, six-month process to a 45-minute meeting.
- **Commitment, Confidence, and Ease of Implementation.** In every case, commitment was intrinsic and implementation followed with less-than-normal need for monitoring, management, revisiting of issues, and re-launches. Moreover, people typically developed increased confidence for success in the task at hand and for the company as a whole.
- **Enhanced Teamwork and Group Effectiveness.** Meetings were more focused and productive, with fewer off-point comments and less repetition. People fixed or aborted meetings that weren't going well. They discussed tough subjects easily, even in large, typically difficult meetings, and maintained or recovered their equanimity when differences arose. For example, by the end of a six-week review of their strategy and associated issues, a self-declared dysfunctional management team had become collaborative, synergistic, and recommitted to that strategy. Two months later, when their parent company went through the upheaval of a new CEO (and associated across-the-board cost reductions), the team remained on course and produced their best financial performance ever.

In general the results attained were of higher quality than was expected, sometimes surprisingly so, whether a result was the clarity of the strategy (simple, obvious, novel, hard to copy, or more resilient); the impact of the solution (dollars produced); or the degree of

alignment and agreement. By the end of the process, problems or issues came to be viewed with greater clarity and coherence. Usually the solution became obvious, simple, and easy to implement, and in nearly half the cases, problems simply dissolved and therefore did not require further attention or action. In most cases Insight Thinking was acquired rapidly; 30 minutes of exposure often had a dramatic effect.

## What Is Insight?

Insight can be said to be a particular form of “fresh thought.” If you reflect for a moment, you will notice that much of our thinking is reviewing, reusing, and rethinking thoughts we’ve already had. For convenience we’ll term this “memory-based thought.” Much of our education has been oriented to memorizing and absorbing facts and methods so that they can be recalled and applied when new problems are encountered. Memory-based thought is very useful when the answer to the new problem is already known or when it can be discovered by a known method using known facts.

Fresh thought is less frequent and noticed than memory-based thought, and is merely a thought (whether good or bad) you’ve never had before. Some fresh thoughts can be illuminating and generative; others can be erroneous. Regardless of type, fresh thought carries with it a recognizable, lighthearted, energizing feeling, which we will later show to be important. Most people will recognize and remember low- and high-quality fresh thought.

## The Nature of Insights

An insight is a high-quality fresh thought and shows you some truth or solution that you’d been missing. Insights feel “right” and are satisfying and pleasing – much like the feeling you get when you intuitively find the place for that strangely shaped piece in the puzzle with which you’ve been struggling. Often, they permanently change your fundamental understanding of the situation at hand. Remember the time in school when, despite the teacher’s



best efforts and frequent repetition and explanation, you just didn't "get" what was being explained to you? Then, all of a sudden, it was clear to you. Insight is like the bird in the tree that you cannot see until someone leads your eyes to the branch. It wasn't there (even though it was) and now it is!

Insights can be small – your intuitive discovery of a new and effective short cut in your word processor program, or a slight shift in the way you hold your golf club, for example.

***An insight goes beyond an intellectual understanding – the ability to repeat an idea that someone else has articulated, or to follow a set of rules or a prescription.***

Or they can be life-transforming epiphanies, such as Einstein's Theory of General Relativity, which he described as "the happiest thought of my life."

An insight goes beyond an intellectual understanding – the ability to repeat an idea that someone else has articulated, or to follow a set of rules or a prescription. With deeper understanding, you become fluent enough with the idea that, for example, you can participate in an unstructured, free argument or compare and contrast the idea with others. The idea is still really someone else's, but you are on

your way to being generative. Then, in an unpredictable moment, when you experience the idea in a more intense or integrated way; it becomes yours. Your understanding going forward is irrevocably altered. Your understanding of everything in the past can change as well – often so much that you can no longer see the idea in the old way.

## **Increasing Insight**

There is little doubt that insights are good. So how do you have more of them? The simple answer is to spend more time in a state of mind that is conducive to having insights. That state of mind has a flowing feeling to it. Each thought flows into the next at a nice tempo and in its own time. There is no pressure, no rush, and no urgency. There is a sense of space between each thought – a breath, a pause. In each of these spaces is the possibility for a fresh thought. In a sense, the spaces between thoughts are the source of insight. If there are no spaces, there is little possibility of insight. Much of the thinking of people with a primarily Western background and lifestyle has the quality of being forced or pressed. Each thought is crushed into the next. When we want to solve a problem, we step on the gas and try to power through. When we're engaged with this quality of thinking, though it might seem normal, the possibility of insight is reduced or eliminated.

In contrast, insight-rich thinking is probably more consistent with the "flow" state written about so often in the context of sports or the performing arts. One subtle difference is that what we term Insight Thinking does not always have that "peak experience" feel to it that people associate with being "on" or "in the zone." It is more akin to a gentle walk home along a familiar route. It is easy, peaceful, and unlabored.

To increase the frequency of insight you simply want your thought to flow more often. The good news is that this "insight state of mind" (calm, clear-headed, focused) is so basic and natural that you return to it, almost without noticing, when you're not thinking in other ways. In any moment that you aren't in that state of mind, you have somehow, and in a way unrecognized by you now, thought your way out of it. To return to that state all you need do is stop thinking your way out of it! One colleague likens the phenomenon to holding a basketball under water. The natural state is for the ball to float effortlessly on the surface,



whereas keeping it submerged requires work. In a similar way, it takes mental work to “lower” one’s state of mind and be out of flow. Just noticing that and, if necessary, stopping whatever you were doing, naturally returns your mind to a calmer, quieter state. This stands in sharp contrast to much else we do, wherein the desired state requires us to do more, not less.

## **Dropping Out of an Insight State of Mind**

While simple in concept, fresh thinking can prove challenging for at least two reasons. First, while memory-based (and other repetitive) thinking can be useful for certain things, the problem is that it becomes self-reinforcing – almost demanding that we use it more and more, past the point of usefulness. It becomes a habit and dominates. Memory-based thinking is useful; the unmindful habit of its use is not, because unconsciously it disconnects us from access to insight. Even the most analytic of us knows this. While often employing rigorous analytic thinking, great performers in all fields report that their best insights and solutions to problems generally occur when they stop, relax, and shift their focus, often to some unrelated thing. Consider that it’s rather like a muscle: both the relaxed and contracted states are good, but the power of contraction requires the periods of relaxation. It would be exhausting and debilitating to go around all the time with contracted muscles. Likewise, you want to be able to move freely between flowing, fresh thinking and memory-based thinking. In this regard, the insight state of mind is similar to the “mindfulness” of many religions – a state of bearing witness to the quality and content of thought.

Second, when those unfamiliar spaces of nothingness between thoughts show up, many of us get uncomfortable or even anxious. It’s like not having the answer when we think we should. To resolve the discomfort, we immediately – and often unconsciously – fill the gap with a memory-based thought and thus destroy the possibility of seeking out the mental silences, dwelling in the unknown, and uncovering an insight.

Most of the time, however, we’re not in an insight state because we’re distracted out of it by insecurity, frustration, disappointment, anger, worry, or physical fatigue. (Note that all of

these states, perhaps save the last, are ultimately also thoughts – and all of us can change our minds even when it doesn't seem like we can.) We enter into these unproductive states in a virtually infinite number of ways (a bad weekly report, a lost sale, an angry colleague, long hours, and the like) and generally without recognizing that we have. Once in, we press through primarily by exclusive use of analytic thought. Unknowingly, the more we press on, the more we lower our state of mind. We are then far less creative and tend to make more mistakes. And since the strategies we formulate to escape the situation are the products of a low-quality thinking process, they are not very likely to be successful.

## **Returning to an Insight State of Mind**

Many people are so habituated to these psychological experiences that they don't even realize they are caught in them. Others have devised clever methods for changing their thinking, such as replacing negative thoughts with positive ones or initiating a distraction. But it's hard and never-ending work to use the mind to outfox the mind. The good news is that it turns out to be unnecessary. Fortunately, we come equipped at birth with a barometer for high-quality thought – the presence or absence of what we'll term simply a “good feeling.” By good feeling, we mean that inner satisfaction you experience when, all of a sudden, you solve the problem you've been stewing on or something becomes obvious. Your head is clear, your thinking feels sharp, and you are present and appreciative. All feels right with the world. There are many other good feelings (triumph over an adversary, completion of a task, etc.), all of which are valid and most of which are good to have, but they are not what we mean by good feeling as it pertains to an insight state of mind. When this “naturally right” inner feeling is present, you are probably connected with your inner wisdom; when you are feeling cloudy, confused, pressured or angry, you're probably not.

## **Insight Thinking Methods**

People do all sorts of things to get into an insight state of mind. Some go for a walk or run. Others go on vacation. Or garden. Or pray. Or take a long bath. Or play the saxophone. In the office, when stuck in a bad frame of mind, one might stand and stretch, or go to the window and watch the clouds, the traffic, or the skyline. Any and all of these can work, but none works for everyone or all the time. If something did, it probably would have been discovered by now. In Western society, we are predisposed to want to learn techniques we can apply as needed. However, there are many things, and Insight Thinking is one, that do not work as a predefined or structured process (for example, listening to music, looking at a picture, going for a walk, or romancing a partner). You might use certain methods from time to time, but they will be specific to you and you will use them when it feels right or makes sense rather than routinely or by prescription.

## **“It's About the Principles”**

Insight Thinking is more an understanding of and sensitivity to a set of principles (or working premises) than a set of techniques. From these principles the method or technique arises naturally and spontaneously, as often happens in sports or the arts. Great basketball players clearly have an intrinsic understanding of the principles, rules, strategies, and mechanics of

their game. But their play is dictated by what is required in the moment, and often without much conscious thought. It is similar with Insight Thinking. From the principles comes behavior (already learned or newly invented) appropriate to the moment and much more potent than script.

Our two major premises are:

1. When the mind is calm, at rest, and unpressured, it is most open to fresh thought and insight.
2. As we come to insights into how thought forms our personal experience, we are less and less distracted from that calm state, and return to it with relative ease when we get off track.

The essence of Insight Thinking, then, is to maintain an insight state of mind as you work on and seek insights into problems or issues. You keep your eye on the quality of your thought and at various points you have insights – into the problem itself and into how thought personally works for you. You may have noticed that when you're thinking of buying a new car, it is common suddenly to start noticing more cars on the road like the one you're considering. Analogously, when you know that an insight and a state of mind are what you seek, you will notice insights more readily and the state of mind will tend to show up more often. In a similar manner, just noticing the loss of the good feeling will set you back on the path to a clear mind in the same way you naturally make the correction of moving back when you have drifted out of your lane on the highway. "Noticing and shifting back" is as simple as that, and with a little bit of awareness and experience it becomes easy and second nature.

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Your mind settles down and naturally seeks a quiet state without your conscious attention to the task. Thereafter, everything seems to handle itself; the natural or innate intelligence of the mind is allowed to operate and you become immunized against disturbance and distraction. (People seem instinctively programmed to know what to do to access an insight state of mind and to occupy that state of mind with increasing frequency.) Moment by moment there is greater awareness of thought. The good-feeling state becomes more habitual – the new normal – and its absence then becomes quickly noted and a natural correction spontaneously occurs.

Sometimes this shift of habit occurs in a flash; at other times it takes a while. For most people, it requires attention, patience, and practice. Fortunately, practice is not onerous. It feels good physically and psychologically and is accompanied by creativity, better ideas, fewer mistakes, and natural good judgment. You just live life and do your best to find your way to the good feeling.

The Insight Thinking principles can be learned and practiced individually, during team meetings, or both. It is generally sufficient to have individuals engage in a couple of 75-minute conversations in which they look for insight on current business problems. In a group, the principles can be taught in a few half-hour sessions interspersed throughout a day and alternated with "supervised" practice on a real problem or issue. In both cases the idea is to help people surface and reconnect with their personal insight states of mind, perhaps by reflecting on and sharing a past experience or two that involved insight.



Once people see for themselves that this state is desirable because their quality of thought is higher, it is a matter of practice until the “feel” of the insight state takes root. There can be benefits to creating structures that work like memory aids to help maintain awareness of the state of mind. These structures are things that surface and break prevailing thought patterns or cause a moment of reflection, like looking for insight when things seem to get sticky, establishing new team norms, or taking a break when things get thick.

### **Insight Thinking in Teams**

When people quite naturally get engrossed to the point of distraction in the subject of their discussion, thought quality can deteriorate without their noticing. For this and a host of other reasons, it can be particularly challenging for a team to see its thinking. When others in a group are familiar with Insight Thinking there are multiple sentinels, increasing the likelihood that someone will notice when a meeting has gotten heavy, labored, or otherwise off the rails. Only one person in a good state of mind is needed to pull the emergency brake. Often, the mere remark that “the good feeling is gone” is sufficient for people

to recover their bearings and take the conversation in a new or better direction.

While not a requirement, it can be quite useful to have a person who is experienced with Insight Thinking focus on the quality of the conversation. This person avoids involvement with the content of the discussion and is, ideally, someone who does not think about the problem or issue in the way team members do. Though it is certainly possible for team members to perform this function, it is generally more difficult in early stages of learning Insight Thinking, or when the subject becomes heated. If you’re in this role, remember: helping to activate Insight Thinking doesn’t require that you have the answers. Others will.

### **The Promise for Leaders**

It is generally held that the world is speeding up and that the way to deal with that is to think faster and harder. Our experience during the past 18 months is that this is at best only partially true. It can be a great advantage for leaders to slow down thought and to mitigate the tendency to think fast and furiously.

So far, we have not found a problem whose solution required resources that people did not already have. Being stumped by a big problem is a function of mental stress rather than of the “size” of the problem; and the size of a problem is solely a function of thought. Inherent creative capacity and wisdom seem essentially unlimited, and will rise to every occasion if they are allowed to. They do so in the worst of times – and particularly at the very

time they are needed. Psychologists have long known that people always can find their way. We have found this to be true for organizations as well.

In a world in which all organizations must encourage innovative thinking from all quarters, we believe Insight Thinking holds great promise for leaders. Consider the potential returns: What is the value of increased frequency of fresh new ideas by your staff? Imagine that one special idea that creates a new horizon for your team or enterprise or that causes your worst, most persistent problem to vanish. What would you pay for your organization not to have made the two biggest mistakes of the past five years? And finally, what is the value of better business judgment and acumen, particularly when multiplied by your entire team and any or all of your colleagues?

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **Resources**

For further information on the bases of Insight Thinking Methods, see:

Pransky, George S., *The Renaissance of Psychology* (New York: Sulzburger & Graham Publishing, Ltd., 1998). More accessible is Dr. Pransky's CD set, *The Foundation of Mental Well-Being*.

Carlson, Richard and Bailey, Joseph, *Slowing Down to the Speed of Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997). This is an earlier, popular book.

Mills, Roger and Spittle, Elsie. *The Wisdom Within* (Edmonton, AB: Lone Pine Publishing, 2001). Mills's and Spittle's Health Realization Institute has focused with great success in using these methods in community empowerment, drug rehabilitation, and in prisons ([www.healthrealization.com](http://www.healthrealization.com)).

### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

**Charles Kiefer** founded Innovation Associates (IA) in 1976 to develop and apply new ways to improve organizational thinking, learning, alignment, and change. The firm's work provided a basis, in part, for IA cofounder Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*, published in 1990.

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**Robin Charbit** is a chemical engineer, seasoned business manager, and consultant. He has worked for Exxon and for Arthur D. Little, where he led the North America Chemicals Practice. In 2002 he cofounded Insight Management Partners, with Charles Kiefer, to focus on executive insight and decision making.

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## Commentary

*By Charlie Fischer*



Charlie Fischer

To many executives, the authors' discussion of Insight Thinking might seem overly simplistic or "soft." After all, to get great business results you need talented people with good analytic abilities and good data. But people often forget that *how* you make decisions – how you think – is also important. In that regard, the article addresses a significant business dilemma. As managers, we are under such pressure that we often don't use quality thinking. We rush through the mechanics of decision-making and don't give our minds the chance to reflect as well as we might. At Dow AgroSciences we generated hard results by paying attention to better thinking. A psychologist looking at the process would say that there was nothing soft about it.

For me, the impacts of Insight Thinking were both personal (what I was able to learn and do as a leader) and organizational (the results the company was able to achieve). At a personal level, Insight Thinking allowed me and others to change our perspectives and improve our relationships easily. For some time, our executive team had been friendly but not very effective. When I was honest with myself – which Insight Thinking helped me to be – I saw that I was the one who most needed to change. My strong-willed style – which, in part, got me the CEO job – hindered my ability in meetings to get the best thinking from myself and from my staff. I'd invite discussion of tough issues, but then would challenge those who disagreed with me and vigorously defend my position. This quickly stifled critical thinking and the free exchange of ideas.

As we assimilated the principles of Insight Thinking, I learned to become much more open, and we all spent more meeting time in a better frame of mind. That directly helped us work more effectively, both as individuals and as a group. I was amazed by people's increasing comfort and confidence in questioning me and each other. We generated better ideas in which everyone felt greater ownership. That confidence and sense of ownership contributed significantly to improved business performance.

At the time, our firm was facing a declining market and heavy overseas competition. We had developed a new strategy and set aggressive financial goals that many on the executive team, and in most of the rest of the organization, believed were unachievable in our two-year timeframe. In just a few months of our training, this disbelief faded and a vision took root in its place. Ultimately, our organization found implementation surprisingly straightforward and unencumbered. Like most other companies, ours traditionally had been all about the data – and of course, data are important. But our biggest challenge was engaging and motivating everyone to do what we knew we had to do. Data alone would not do it; attitude and understanding were key.

Before our use of Insight Thinking, internal surveys showed that employees didn't know what our strategy was, though we felt we were telling them all the time. Nearly one year later, we had our highest survey marks ever, with near-universal understanding and acceptance

of our strategy, despite the tough medicine of layoffs and restructuring that it entailed. I believe that this was a reflection of clearer thinking and more open exchange of ideas – both within the executive team and between the executives and their direct reports. Many other things also went right for us, but if we had not changed our way of thinking, we never would have met our goals. The firm ultimately achieved a \$300 million earnings increase (on \$3 billion of sales) – three times what was deemed “reasonable” two years earlier, and the best performance in the company’s history. Learning how to access our best collective thinking and change our own behavior made those results possible.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Charlie Fischer** is the former president and chief executive officer of Dow AgroSciences, a global organization with \$3 billion in sales and more than 6,000 employees located in more than 50 countries. He retired in 2004, after 37 years of international service. Charlie has a BA in animal science from Texas A&M University and has held numerous leadership appointments in the US and global agriculture and biotechnology industries.

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## Commentary

*By Miguel Oliveira*



Miguel Oliveira

Robin Charbit and Charles Kiefer have addressed an essential but under-appreciated role of leaders – advancing the quality of their organization’s thinking. If we are responsible for getting things done in effective and efficient ways, we have to be aware of, take into account, and try to improve our individual and collective thought processes. Thoughts lead to decisions, which in turn lead to results. Without clear, critical thinking, high quality results are very hard to achieve.

In doing their jobs, I believe leaders can draw on three fundamental resources: intelligence, creativity, and wisdom. I don’t claim special gifts in any of these realms, but hopefully I have become wiser in life and in work, and especially in my dealings with people. That wisdom has come largely from trying to better understand each individual’s feelings, motivations, and states of mind, and I’ve seen this work for my colleagues, as well.

Simple tools like Insight Thinking – those that help us engage with people, frame an issue, advance both our own and their thinking, and, ultimately, get things done – are powerful. Before Insight Thinking, I could only use metaphors, stories, and exercises to help people across a wide spectrum of backgrounds to address complex issues. For example, I have used an exercise in which people do a seemingly insurmountable task – tying a knot using just their left hand (if they’re right handed) – to give them the experience of accomplishing more than they thought they could. Such experiences provided a simple but common language for problem solving. People in my company still

refer to one-handed knots as a short hand for unexpectedly high performance, even if they’ve forgotten the particular challenges I spoke about that day. As the authors suggest, it’s possible to take a similar approach to thinking processes.

Once we become aware of our own and others’ thinking and states of minds, we have a common language for discussing them and the resultant behaviors. That helps to overcome the thoughts that often impede shared understanding and action. Without such understanding, people often discount the influence that their own attitudes and beliefs have on outcomes, and put more emphasis on outside factors.

Another challenge as a leader is to create a shared vision and understanding of our purpose as an organization. This is a challenge in part because “vision” and “purpose” exist in the domain of thought. Through Insight Thinking, leaders can more easily help people connect with and believe in a shared vision. Once people see something for themselves they can accomplish almost anything.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## Commentary

By *C. Sherry Immediato*



C. Sherry Immediato

Having followed Charlie Kiefer's work in the area of Insight Thinking during the past seven years, I've become persuaded that the methods he and Robin Charbit are developing are an important foundation for generative thinking and action, and complement the tools that we generally associate with dialogue, productive conversation, and systems thinking. In addition, I think their approach to filling gaps in the practice of collective intelligence and wisdom offers a good developmental template. My comments on both the content and process of their research follow.

Do the Insight Thinking Methods (ITM) work? And are they really as easy to use as the authors say? Those who challenge their work often argue either that something is missing or that the results are a fluke and not reproducible. At the outset, I was in the camp of the critics. But my own experience and observation of others have caused me to re-examine two fundamental assumptions I had been making: (1) that good things consistently come only to those who work hard and (2) that people won't work hard enough to achieve good results (including good thinking) if the barometer for continuing to work is a good feeling. The clarity of the Insight Thinking principles has made it easier for me to identify those assumptions "at work" in my own thinking. As a consequence, I have noticed that my own principles, taken to the extreme, suggest that the impediments to Insight Thinking are natural, and maybe even desirable. But do I really want to argue that insecurity, frustration, disappoint-

ment, anger, worry, and fatigue should be sought out as ingredients in our work processes? Of course not. My most useful thought from working with the insight principles may be the recognition of the "natural" state which I have unconsciously accepted.

Becoming aware of our thinking often requires "slowing down." On a sunny summer day several weeks ago, traffic on one of Boston's perimeter highways came to a standstill when 100 or so cars suffered flat tires after encountering an enormous pothole. The cars eventually accumulated to create a physical barricade that forced oncoming drivers to slow down and notice the pothole before driving through it. As I listened to this unfold (on the radio traffic reports), I found myself drawing parallels between our driving habits and our thinking habits. As an observer of people in conversations and meetings, and of the unsatisfactory decisions and actions that result, I find myself frequently asking "What could they have been thinking?" And I notice that I am much more likely to ask the question about their thinking than about my own. Perhaps this is because disabled thinkers, unlike disabled drivers, are not physically compelled to "pull over to the side of the road" or "slow down to notice the potholes" before driving through them.

It may be useful to note that the consequence of continually driving a car through fields of small potholes (a.k.a. the streets of Boston)

is a set of wheels out of alignment. In the best case, this misalignment causes uneven, premature tire wear and lowered mileage performance. In the worst case, the car is also much more difficult to handle and can be an accident waiting to happen. If you had only the experience of driving an out-of-alignment car, you would assume the car's behavior was normal, even on a perfectly smooth road. As a Boston driver, I do forget what it's like to have wheels in perfect alignment. And though I'm a little embarrassed by it, I'm greatly relieved that I can recognize that I sometimes mindlessly accept low-level frustration, worry, disappointment, etc. as the "normal" context for my own thinking and action. This simple awareness has made it possible for me to remind myself of what I truly know to be a natural state for accessing generative thought. At a recent executive gathering, someone referred to this "remembering" as the desire and need "to take a breath to think." And then act. Perhaps ITM is just that simple to use.

While I am personally very enthusiastic about the content of the Insight Thinking work, I am even more excited by the authors' approach and how it could inspire other members of the SoL community. This article began as a report on the Insight Thinking "experiment" the authors have been conducting for the past two years. Though too much of their data is anecdotal and recorded too long after the fact to meet traditional standards of research, their overall approach is still very consistent with an action research (or applied learning) process that provides a good foundation for further study. A clear need is identified (decision-making disasters and a tendency to favor reactive thought processes), hypotheses

are stated, and experiments are conducted. The other commentaries provide evidence of experiments that range from the relatively local (a single team) to those that affect large numbers of people within an organization. Given the retrospective design, the authors have done what data collection they could by interviewing their clients some months after the intervention (which provides important data regarding duration of effects), have synthesized the data, and are now sharing them with their peers. Their straightforward discussion about the barriers to adoption of their methods provides a particularly interesting agenda for inquiry going forward. The methods and issues they posit are practically relevant to the work of Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, and Flowers (on moving through the "U" process underlying deep learning and generative action) previously reported in *Reflections*.

I think Robin and Charlie are on to something. Their work may be the organizational equivalent of Herb Benson's seminal work on the "relaxation response."<sup>1</sup> Benson and others at the Harvard Medical School have nearly 30 years of data about the value for physical health of the link between mental and physical relaxation. Their early work was treated with skepticism and faced a similar refrain: "It can't be this easy." With the focus now shifted beyond the health of the mere individual to our collective intellectual, emotional, and psychological health, let's turn the question around – what if it is that easy? What if a larger reservoir of intelligence is easily available and accessible through a relatively low level of discipline? As an advocate for economy of means, I'm encouraged by

the simplicity of the deep level of structure that the authors are directing us to consider. I look forward to future community contributions to Reflections that continue to connect the heart of organizational learning with the practices of daily life. Drive reflectively!

**Endnote**

- 1 Herbert Benson and Miriam Z. Klipper, *The Relaxation Response* (New York: Harper, 1976).

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