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HOW
SUCCESSFUL
PEOPLE
THINK

CHANGE YOUR THINKING, CHANGE YOUR LIFE

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INTRODUCTION

Good thinkers are always in demand. A person who knows *how* may always have a job, but the person who knows *why* will always be his boss. Good thinkers solve problems, they never lack ideas that can build an organization, and they always have hope for a better future. Good thinkers rarely find themselves at the mercy of ruthless people who would take advantage of them or try to deceive them, people like Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler, who once boasted, “What luck for rulers that men do not think.” Those who develop the process of good thinking can rule themselves—even while under an oppressive ruler or in other difficult circumstances. In short, good thinkers are successful.

I’ve studied successful people for forty years, and though the diversity you find among them is astounding, I’ve found that they are all alike in one way: how they think! That is the one thing that separates successful people from unsuccessful ones. And here’s the good news. How successful

people think can be learned. If you change your thinking, you can change your life!

WHY YOU SHOULD CHANGE YOUR THINKING

It's hard to overstate the value of changing your thinking. Good thinking can do many things for you: generate revenue, solve problems, and create opportunities. It can take you to a whole new level—personally and professionally. It really can change your life.

Consider some things you need to know about changing your thinking:

1. Changed Thinking Is Not Automatic

Sadly, a change in thinking doesn't happen on its own. Good ideas rarely go out and find someone. If you want to find a good idea, you must search for it. If you want to become a better thinker, you need to work at it—and once you begin to become a better thinker, the good ideas keep coming. In fact, the amount of good thinking you can do at any time depends primarily on the amount of good thinking you are already doing.

2. Changed Thinking Is Difficult

When you hear someone say, “Now this is just off the top of my head,” expect dandruff. The only people who believe thinking is easy are those who don't habitually engage in it. Nobel Prize-winning physicist Albert Einstein,

one of the best thinkers who ever lived, asserted, “Thinking is hard work; that’s why so few do it.” Because thinking is so difficult, you want to use anything you can to help you improve the process.

3. Changed Thinking Is Worth the Investment

Author Napoleon Hill observed, “More gold has been mined from the thoughts of man than has ever been taken from the earth.” When you take the time to learn how to change your thinking and become a better thinker, you are investing in yourself. Gold mines tap out. Stock markets crash. Real estate investments can go sour. But a human mind with the ability to think well is like a diamond mine that never runs out. It’s priceless.

HOW TO BECOME A BETTER THINKER

Do you want to master the process of good thinking? Do you want to be a better thinker tomorrow than you are today? Then you need to engage in an ongoing process that improves your thinking. I recommend you do the following:

1. Expose Yourself to Good Input

Good thinkers always prime the pump of ideas. They always look for things to get the thinking process started, because what you put in always impacts what comes out.

Read books, review trade magazines, listen to tapes, and spend time with good thinkers. And when something in-

trigues you—whether it’s someone else’s idea or the seed of an idea that you’ve come up with yourself—keep it in front of you. Put it in writing and keep it somewhere in your favorite thinking place to stimulate your thinking.

2. Expose Yourself to Good Thinkers

Spend time with the right people. As I worked on this section and bounced my ideas off of some key people (so that my thoughts would be stretched), I realized something about myself. All of the people in my life whom I consider to be close friends or colleagues are thinkers. Now, I love all people. I try to be kind to everyone I meet, and I desire to add value to as many people as I can through conferences, books, audio lessons, etc. But the people I seek out and choose to spend time with all challenge me with their thinking and their actions. They are constantly trying to grow and learn. That’s true of my wife, Margaret, my close friends, and the executives who run my companies. Every one of them is a good thinker!

The writer of Proverbs observed that sharp people sharpen one another, just as iron sharpens iron. If you want to be a sharp thinker, be around sharp people.

3. Choose to Think Good Thoughts

To become a good thinker, you must become intentional about the thinking process. Regularly put yourself in the right place to think, shape, stretch, and land your thoughts. Make it a priority. Remember, thinking is a discipline.

Recently I had breakfast with Dan Cathy, the president

of Chick-fil-A, a fast food chain headquartered in the Atlanta area. I told him that I was working on this book and I asked him if he made thinking time a high priority. Not only did he say yes, but he told me about what he calls his “thinking schedule.” It helps him to fight the hectic pace of life that discourages intentional thinking. Dan says he sets aside time just to think for half a day every two weeks, for one whole day every month, and for two or three full days every year. Dan explains, “This helps me ‘keep the main thing, the main thing,’ since I am so easily distracted.”

You may want to do something similar, or you can develop a schedule and method of your own. No matter what you choose to do, go to your thinking place, take paper and pen, and make sure you capture your ideas in writing.

4. Act on Your Good Thoughts

Ideas have a short shelf life. You must act on them before the expiration date. World War I flying ace Eddie Rickenbacker said it all when he remarked, “I can give you a six-word formula for success: Think things through—then follow through.”

5. Allow Your Emotions to Create Another Good Thought

To start the thinking process, you cannot rely on your feelings. In *Failing Forward*, I wrote that you can act your way into feeling long before you can feel your way into action. If you wait until you feel like doing something, you will likely never accomplish it. The same is true for thinking. You cannot wait until you *feel* like thinking to do it.

However, I've found that once you engage in the process of good thinking, you can use your emotions to feed the process and create mental momentum.

Try it for yourself. After you go through the disciplined process of thinking and enjoy some success, allow yourself to savor the moment and try riding the mental energy of that success. If you're like me, it's likely to spur additional thoughts and productive ideas.

6. Repeat the Process

One good thought does not make a good life. The people who have one good thought and try to ride it for an entire career often end up unhappy or destitute. They are the one-hit wonders, the one-book authors, the one-message speakers, the one-time inventors who spend their life struggling to protect or promote their single idea. Success comes to those who have an entire mountain of gold that they continually mine, not those who find one nugget and try to live on it for fifty years. To become someone who can mine a lot of gold, you need to keep repeating the process of good thinking.

PUTTING YOURSELF IN THE RIGHT PLACE TO THINK

Becoming a good thinker isn't overly complicated. It's a discipline. If you do the six things I have outlined, you will set yourself up for a lifestyle of better thinking. But what do you do to come up with specific ideas on a day-to-day basis?

I want to teach you the process that I've used to discover and develop good thoughts. It's certainly not the only one that works, but it has worked well for me.

1. Find a Place to Think Your Thoughts

If you go to your designated place to think expecting to generate good thoughts, then eventually you will come up with some. Where is the best place to think? Everybody's different. Some people think best in the shower. Others, like my friend Dick Biggs, like to go to a park. For me, the best places to think are in my car, on planes, and in the spa. Ideas come to me in other places as well, such as when I'm in bed. (I keep a special lighted writing pad on my nightstand for such times.) I believe I often get thoughts because I make it a habit to frequently go to my thinking places. If you want to consistently generate ideas, you need to do the same thing. Find a place where you can think, and plan to capture your thoughts on paper so that you don't lose them. When I found a place to think my thoughts, my thoughts found a place in me.

2. Find a Place to Shape Your Thoughts

Rarely do ideas come fully formed and completely worked out. Most of the time, they need to be shaped until they have substance. As my friend Dan Reiland says, they have to "stand the test of clarity and questioning." During the shaping time, you want to hold an idea up to strong scrutiny. Many times a thought that seemed outstanding late at night looks pretty silly in the light of day. Ask questions

about your ideas. Fine tune them. One of the best ways to do that is to put your thoughts in writing. Professor, college president, and U.S. senator S. I. Hayakawa wrote, “Learning to write is learning to think. You don’t know anything clearly unless you can state it in writing.”

As you shape your thoughts, you find out whether an idea has potential. You learn what you have. You also learn some things about yourself. The shaping time thrills me because it embodies:

- **Humor:** The thoughts that don’t work often provide comic relief.
- **Humility:** The moments when I connect with God awe me.
- **Excitement:** I love to play out an idea mentally. (I call it “futuring” it.)
- **Creativity:** In these moments I am unhampered by reality.
- **Fulfillment:** God made me for this process; it uses my greatest gifts and gives me joy.
- **Honesty:** As I turn over an idea in my mind, I discover my true motives.
- **Passion:** When you shape a thought, you find out what you believe and what really counts.
- **Change:** Most of the changes I have made in my life resulted from thorough thinking on a subject.

You can shape your thoughts almost anywhere. Just find a place that works for you, where you will be able to write

things down, focus your attention without interruptions, and ask questions about your ideas.

3. Find a Place to Stretch Your Thoughts

If you come upon great thoughts and spend time mentally shaping them, don't think you're done and can stop there. If you do, you will miss some of the most valuable aspects of the thinking process. You miss bringing others in and expanding ideas to their greatest potential.

Earlier in my life, I have to admit, I was often guilty of this error. I wanted to take an idea from seed thought to solution before sharing it with anyone, even the people it would most impact. I did this both at work and at home. But over the years, I have learned that you can go much farther with a team than you can go alone.

I've found a kind of formula that can help you stretch your thoughts. It says,

The Right **Thought** plus the Right **People**
in the Right **Environment** at the Right **Time**
for the Right **Reason** = the **Right Result**

This combination is hard to beat. Like every person, every thought has the potential to become something great. When you find a place to stretch your thoughts, you find that potential.

4. Find a Place to Land Your Thoughts

Author C. D. Jackson observes that “great ideas need landing gear as well as wings.” Any idea that remains only an idea doesn’t make a great impact. The real power of an idea comes when it goes from abstraction to application. Think about Einstein’s theory of relativity. When he published his theories in 1905 and 1916, they were merely profound ideas. Their real power came with the development of the nuclear reactor in 1942 and the nuclear bomb in 1945. When scientists developed and implemented Einstein’s ideas, the whole world changed.

Likewise, if you want your thoughts to make an impact, you need to land them with others so that they can someday be implemented. As you plan for the application phase of the thinking process, land your ideas first with . . .

- **Yourself:** Landing an idea with yourself will give you integrity. People will buy into an idea only after they buy into the leader who communicates it. Before teaching any lesson, I ask myself three questions: “Do I believe it? Do I live it? Do I believe others should live it?” If I can’t answer yes to all three questions, then I haven’t landed it.
- **Key Players:** Let’s face it, no idea will fly if the influencers don’t embrace it. After all, they are the people who carry thoughts from idea to implementation.
- **Those Most Affected:** Landing thoughts with the people on the firing line will give you great insight. Those closest to changes that occur as a result of a

new idea can give you a “reality read.” And that’s important, because sometimes even when you’ve diligently completed the process of creating a thought, shaping it, and stretching it with other good thinkers, you can still miss the mark.

5. Find a Place to Fly Your Thoughts

French philosopher Henri-Louis Bergson, who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1927, asserted that a person should “think like a man of action—act like a man of thought.” What good is thinking if it has no application in real life? Thinking divorced from actions cannot be productive. Learning how to master the process of thinking well leads you to productive thinking. If you can develop the discipline of good thinking and turn it into a lifetime habit, then you will be successful and productive all of your life. Once you’ve created, shaped, stretched, and landed your thoughts, then flying them can be fun and easy.

PORTRAIT OF A GOOD THINKER

You often hear someone say that a colleague or friend is a “good thinker,” but that phrase means something different to everyone. To one person it may mean having a high IQ, while to another it could mean knowing a bunch of trivia or being able to figure out whodunit when reading a mystery novel. I believe that good thinking isn’t just one thing. It consists of several specific thinking skills. Becoming a

good thinker means developing those skills to the best of your ability.

It doesn't matter whether you were born rich or poor. It doesn't matter if you have a third grade education or possess a Ph.D. It doesn't matter if you suffer from multiple disabilities or you're the picture of health. No matter what your circumstances, you can learn to be a good thinker. All you must do is be willing to engage in the process every day.

In *Built to Last*, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras describe what it means to be a visionary company, the kind of company that epitomizes the pinnacle of American business. They describe those companies this way:¹

A visionary company is like a great work of art. Think of Michelangelo's scenes from Genesis on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or his statue of David. Think of a great and enduring novel like *Huckleberry Finn* or *Crime and Punishment*. Think of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony or Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Think of a beautifully designed building, like the masterpieces of Frank Lloyd Wright or Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. You can't point to any one single item that makes the whole thing work; it's the entire work—all the pieces working together to create an overall effect—that leads to enduring greatness.

Good thinking is similar. You need all the thinking "pieces" to become the kind of person who can achieve great things. Those pieces include the following eleven skills:

- Seeing the Wisdom of Big-Picture Thinking
- Unleashing the Potential of Focused Thinking
- Discovering the Joy of Creative Thinking
- Recognizing the Importance of Realistic Thinking
- Releasing the Power of Strategic Thinking
- Feeling the Energy of Possibility Thinking
- Embracing the Lessons of Reflective Thinking
- Questioning the Acceptance of Popular Thinking
- Encouraging the Participation of Shared Thinking
- Experiencing the Satisfaction of Unselfish Thinking
- Enjoying the Return of Bottom-Line Thinking

As you read the chapters dedicated to each kind of thinking, you will discover that they do not try to tell you *what* to think; they attempt to teach you *how* to think. As you become acquainted with each skill, you will find that some you do well, others you don't. Learn to develop each of those kinds of thinking, and you will become a better thinker. Master all that you can—including the process of shared thinking which helps you compensate for your weak areas—and your life will change.

Cultivate Big-Picture Thinking

“Where success is concerned, people are not measured in inches, or pounds, or college degrees, or family background; they are measured by the size of their thinking.”

—DAVID SCHWARTZ

Big-picture thinking can benefit any person in any profession. When somebody like Jack Welch tells a GE employee that the ongoing relationship with the customer is more important than the sale of an individual product, he’s reminding them of the big picture. When two parents are fed up with potty training, poor grades, or fender-benders, and one reminds the other that the current difficult time is only a temporary season, then they benefit from thinking big picture. Real estate developer Donald Trump quipped, “You have to think anyway, so why not think big?” Big-picture thinking brings wholeness and maturity to a person’s thinking. It brings perspective. It’s like making the frame

of a picture bigger, in the process expanding not only what you can see, but what you are able to do.

Spend time with big-picture thinkers, and you will find that they:

Learn Continually

Big-picture thinkers are never satisfied with what they already know. They are always visiting new places, reading new books, meeting new people, learning new skills. And because of that practice, they often are able to connect the unconnected. They are lifelong learners.

To help me maintain a learner's attitude, I spend a few moments every morning thinking about my learning opportunities for the day. As I review my calendar and to-do list—knowing whom I will meet that day, what I will read, which meetings I will attend—I note where I am most likely to learn something. Then I mentally cue myself to look attentively for something that will improve me in that situation. If you desire to keep learning, I want to encourage you to examine your day and look for opportunities to learn.

Listen Intentionally

An excellent way to broaden your experience is to listen to someone who has expertise in an area where you don't. I search for such opportunities. One year I spoke to about 900 coaches and scouts at the Senior Bowl, where graduating football players participate in their last college game. I had the opportunity, along with my son-in-law, Steve Miller, to have dinner with NFL head coaches Dave

Wannstedt and Butch Davis. It's not often that you get such an opportunity, so I asked them questions about teamwork and spent a lot of time listening to them. At the end of the evening, as Steve and I were walking to our car, he said to me, "John, I bet you asked those coaches a hundred questions tonight."

"If I'm going to learn and grow," I replied, "I must know what questions to ask and know how to apply the answers to my life. Listening has taught me a lot more than talking."

When you meet with people, it's good to have an agenda so that you can learn. It's a great way to partner with people who can do things you can't. Big-picture thinkers recognize that they don't know lots of things. They frequently ask penetrating questions to enlarge their understanding and thinking. If you want to become a better big-picture thinker, then become a good listener.

Look Expansively

Writer Henry David Thoreau wrote, "Many an object is not seen, though it falls within the range of our visual ray, because it does not come within the range of our intellectual ray." Human beings habitually see their own world first. For example, when people arrive at a leadership conference put on by my company, they want to know where they're going to park, whether they will be able to get a good (and comfortable) seat, whether the speaker will be "on," and if the breaks will be spaced right. When I arrive to speak at the same conference, I want to know that the lighting is good, the sound equipment is operating effec-

tively, whether the speaker's platform will be close enough to the people, etc. Who you are determines what you see—and how you think.

Big-picture thinkers realize there is a world out there besides their own, and they make an effort to get outside of themselves and see other people's worlds through their eyes. It's hard to see the picture while inside the frame. To see how others see, you must first find out how they think. Becoming a good listener certainly helps with that. So does getting over your personal agenda and trying to take the other person's perspective.

Live Completely

French essayist Michel Eyquem de Montaigne wrote, "The value of life lies not in the length of days, but in the use we make of them; a man may live long yet live very little." The truth is that you can spend your life any way you want, but you can spend it only once. Becoming a big-picture thinker can help you to live with wholeness, to live a very fulfilling life. People who see the big picture expand their experience because they expand their world. As a result, they accomplish more than narrow-minded people. And they experience fewer unwanted surprises, too, because they are more likely to see the many components involved in any given situation: issues, people, relationships, timing, and values. They are also, therefore, usually more tolerant of other people and their thinking.

WHY YOU SHOULD RECEIVE THE WISDOM OF BIG-PICTURE THINKING

Intuitively, you probably recognize big-picture thinking as beneficial. Few people want to be closed-minded. No one sets out to be that way. But just in case you're not completely convinced, consider several specific reasons why you should make the effort to become a better big-picture thinker:

1. Big-Picture Thinking Allows You to Lead

You can find many big-picture thinkers who aren't leaders, but you will find few leaders who are not big-picture thinkers. Leaders must be able to do many important things for their people:

- **See the vision before their people do.** They also see more of it. This allows them to . . .
- **Size up situations, taking into account many variables.** Leaders who see the big picture discern possibilities as well as problems to form a foundation to build the vision. Once leaders have done that, they can . . .
- **Sketch a picture of where the team is going,** including any potential challenges or obstacles. The goal of leaders shouldn't be merely to make their people feel good, but to help them be good and accomplish the dream. The vision, shown accurately, will allow leaders to . . .
- **Show how the future connects with the past to**

make the journey more meaningful. When leaders recognize this need for connection and bridge it, then they can . . .

- **Seize the moment when the timing is right.** In leadership, when to move is as important as what you do. As Winston Churchill said, “There comes a special moment in everyone’s life, a moment for which that person was born. . . . When he seizes it . . . it is his finest hour.”

Whether building roads, planning a trip, or moving in leadership, big-picture thinking allows you to enjoy more success. People who are constantly looking at the whole picture have the best chance of succeeding in any endeavor.

2. Big-Picture Thinking Keeps You on Target

Thomas Fuller, chaplain to Charles II of England, observed, “He that is everywhere is nowhere.” To get things done, you need focus. However, to get the right things done, you also need to consider the big picture. Only by putting your daily activities in the context of the big picture will you be able to stay on target. As Alvin Toffler says, “You’ve got to think about ‘big things’ while you’re doing small things, so that all the small things go in the right direction.”

3. Big-Picture Thinking Allows You to See What Others See

One of the most important skills you can develop in

human relations is the ability to see things from the other person's point of view. It's one of the keys to working with clients, satisfying customers, maintaining a marriage, rearing children, helping those who are less fortunate, etc. All human interactions are enhanced by the ability to put yourself in another person's shoes. How? Look beyond yourself, your own interests, and your own world. When you work to consider an issue from every possible angle, examine it in the light of another's history, discover the interests and concerns of others, and try to set aside your own agenda, you begin to see what others see. And that is a powerful thing.

4. Big-Picture Thinking Promotes Teamwork

If you participate in any kind of team activity, then you know how important it is that team members see the whole picture, not just their own part. Anytime a person doesn't know how his work fits with that of his teammates, then the whole team is in trouble. The better the grasp team members have of the big picture, the greater their potential to work together as a team.

5. Big-Picture Thinking Keeps You from Being Caught Up in the Mundane

Let's face it: some aspects of everyday life are absolutely necessary but thoroughly uninteresting. Big-picture thinkers don't let the grind get to them, because they don't lose sight of the all-important overview. They

know that the person who forgets the ultimate is a slave to the immediate.

6. Big-Picture Thinking Helps You to Chart Uncharted Territory

Have you ever heard the expression, “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it”? That phrase undoubtedly was coined by someone who had trouble seeing the big picture. The world was built by people who “crossed bridges” in their minds long before anyone else did. The only way to break new ground or move into uncharted territory is to look beyond the immediate and see the big picture.

HOW TO ACQUIRE THE WISDOM OF BIG-PICTURE THINKING

If you desire to seize new opportunities and open new horizons, then you need to add big-picture thinking to your abilities. To become a good thinker better able to see the big picture, keep in mind the following suggestions:

1. Don’t Strive for Certainty

Big-picture thinkers are comfortable with ambiguity. They don’t try to force every observation or piece of data into pre-formulated mental cubby holes. They think broadly and can juggle many seemingly contradictory thoughts in their minds. If you want to cultivate the ability to think big picture, then you must get used to embracing and dealing with complex and diverse ideas.

2. Learn from Every Experience

Big-picture thinkers broaden their outlook by striving to learn from every experience. They don't rest on their successes, they learn from them. More importantly, they learn from their failures. They can do that because they remain teachable.

Varied experiences—both positive and negative—help you see the big picture. The greater the variety of experience and success, the more potential to learn you have. If you desire to be a big-picture thinker, then get out there and try a lot of things, take a lot of chances, and take time to learn after every victory or defeat.

3. Gain Insight from a Variety of People

Big-picture thinkers learn from their experiences. But they also learn from experiences they don't have. That is, they learn by receiving insight from others—from customers, employees, colleagues, and leaders.

If you desire to broaden your thinking and see more of the big picture, then seek out counselors to help you. But be wise in whom you ask for advice. Gaining insight from a variety of people doesn't mean stopping anyone and everyone in hallways and grocery store lines and asking what they think about a given subject. Be selective. Talk to people who know and care about you, who know their field, and who bring experience deeper and broader than your own.

4. Give Yourself Permission to Expand Your World

If you want to be a big-picture thinker, you will have to go against the flow of the world. Society wants to keep people in boxes. Most people are married mentally to the status quo. They want what was, not what can be. They seek safety and simple answers. To think big-picture, you need to give yourself permission to go a different way, to break new ground, to find new worlds to conquer. And when your world does get bigger, you need to celebrate. Never forget there is more out there in the world than what you've experienced.

Keep learning, keep growing, and keep looking at the big picture! If you desire to be a good thinker, that's what you need to do.

Thinking Question

Am I thinking beyond myself and my world so that I process ideas with a holistic perspective?

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