

## How do you teach managers to think: A testimony.

Jan De Visch, June 2019

The above question might seem strange to the reader. We all tend to assume that managers are naturally able to assess situations and make decisions based on them. We assume that what they do is, to a large part, what we call 'thinking'.

In the following article I will build on Otto Laske's approach, arguing that few managers are aware of the limitations of their logic-analytical approach to reality, and consequently fail to deal adequately with the complexity that surrounds them. As organizations increasingly 'flatten', more and more managers are becoming aware of the fact that they are in fact reducing real-world complexity to fit their thought simplifications. Consequently, they are beginning to look for tools that help increase the quality of their thinking process. What tools might lend themselves to this is, however, not obvious. In the following text, I share some experiences I have made as a critical facilitator working with managers in organizations.

### What does thinking mean to you? Content or form?

When I start workshops with this question, the answers I hear all circle around trying to understand what is happening. In our thinking, we process raw facts into information, by distinguishing between what is essential and what is not. This allows us to see patterns in what seems to be happening. With the help of thinking, we orient ourselves to these patterns. Since real-world patterns we notice are complex, in a first step we start simplifying reality to deal with them.

For example, when we think about the needs of a specific customer segment, it is relatively easy for participants in my workshops to draw up a list of them. Some items are not always agreed upon, but that does not initially matter so much. In drawing up this list, participants put forward concepts (such as user experience of different touchpoints, functionalities, security, and much more ...).

Since we express our thoughts in verbal language, we can point to concepts that come to mind for us. We associate thinking with having thoughts which become crystallized in concepts. However, rarely do we ask ourselves how these thoughts arise and how they are constructed by us.

A list of customer needs looks very different from a simple list when you also think about the important contexts in which the customer group moves, and you soon realize that there is no apparent homogeneity in what we define as a customer segment. When you ask which needs on the list develop and change (and will, within six months, look very different), or when you notice that often certain 'needs' hang together and thus cannot be separated from each other, the checklist that results has a different content.

By reading the list, it quickly becomes clear that lists are always the result of a major simplification of reality. The reason for the simplifications people impose on reality is that they typically look for relatively straightforward cause-effect relationships which have little to do with "how the real world works".

It is by no means an obvious step for managers to recognize that thinking is not just about perceptions and the content of what they 'think'. There is a deep conviction that thinking is an information processing and calculation process. Managers assume that as we become better at information processing (and thus eliminate thinking errors), the quality of our thinking improves. And this is partly true. These days, thinking is often – even unconsciously -- compared to what computers already seem to do much better than people in processing information. According to many

managers, improving the quality of their thinking, gets restricted to eliminating their thinking errors (which are suspected of not being made by computers). However, human 'errors' are often more intelligent than what computer software can do since they imply a broader than strictly factual perspective.

Computer systems function based on algorithms. An algorithm is a rule that prescribes that a process must be carried out in several carefully defined steps to achieve a manageable result, leading to problem solutions. Considered as a whole, algorithms are thought models based on a set of logical relationships. They do not describe how people think; they only model what people would think if they were to think strictly "logically". And thinking strictly logically is usually insufficient for understanding what happens in the real world.

What often remains hidden is that 'information processing' is only a very small aspect of the way people think. Information processing only has to do with content (data) but not with how such content comes into being, changes over time, is related to other content, and so forth. These latter aspects are, however, crucial.

After all, to find solutions (not to speak of 'truths'), we have to assume that some of our logic-based thoughts relate to something real 'out there', and knowing that only humans are logical, but not reality itself, it's clear that information processing can never replace knowledge acquisition in the full sense. In the end, it is the forms of thought we use that determine what comes to be seen by us as "reality", and we thus constantly transcend mere information processing. Put differently, what we call "reality" is our own construction, and different people construct reality differently.

\*\*\*

**That there is no "reality" without humans constructing it based on the concepts they use is an incredibly difficult insight for most managers to reach.** Managers have no inkling that in addition to *content*, a thought also has a *form*. This means that a specific thought can take many different forms. The form of thought chosen by a thinker/speaker/writer determines the kind of canvas on which the content produced by thought appears.

Taking form of thought into account, we can think more complexly: we can think about customer needs (1) from a broader perspective, (2) as an evolutionary process, or (3) as a set of essential relationships, and (4) as being in constant transformation. These four different forms of thought will create different contents.

In order to come closer to the real world's complexity – which as a 'content' is in unceasing motion related to other contents -- we use a multitude of forms of thinking, which in being combined by us form the essence of the thinking process. These different forms of constructing real-world content account for human's ability to develop a higher degree of realism about how the world works than mere information processing allows for.

Otto Laske has made it his life's work to make people aware of the relationship between their thought forms and what it is they experience of the real and inner world. Becoming aware of different forms of thinking essentially creates an awareness of how you (often unconsciously) delete important aspects of reality, and how you can, by reflection, undo these deletions in order to become more adapted to, as well as critical of, reality.

For instance, if you know that recognizing relationships (which is a form of thinking) helps you define customer needs more realistically, and are aware that you can use different forms of thinking to describe and reflect upon them -- for example patterns of how customer needs evolve -- then

contents you have not thought of before will make the list of contents you care to think about. Someone who consciously uses forms of thinking and can recognize them as different from each other, increases the complexity of his thoughts, and thereby the clarity with which the world is going to show up for him.

### Learning to think as an adult is unpleasant

Increasing the complexity in your mind is not something that feels comfortable initially. We usually focus our thoughts on a very limited slice of reality. For example, I recently had a manager who got excited about the lack of planning in his teams. This framing led to several initiatives to encourage employees to improve their planning. Investments were made in all kinds of planning tools and processes. Little changed. The manager attributed this outcome to 'resistance to change' which is, all in all, an example of simplification and strictly linear interpretation of what was happening.

When I asked him about the elements of his environment that influence insufficient planning (a contextual way of thinking), what he thought was changing and was relatively stable, as well as which systems and processes informed the planning approach he followed, he became very uncomfortable.

It is very difficult for all of us to think about something without having a feeling about it at the same time. On the one hand, this feeling is related to how we perceive ourselves in contrast to how we would like to be seen. In the case of the manager in question, we could interpret his stance by saying that he likes to have things under control. On the other hand, the feeling is also related to the experience of coherence and consistency in the way our thoughts unfold. If a manager feels an absence of coherence in a situation and/or his thinking about it, s(he) is going to feel uncomfortable.

The discomfort is also related to the burgeoning awareness that most concepts, presumably all concepts one uses, are not well defined. Their borders with other concepts are blurry, and we are only too happy if our interlocutor seems to understand them in the same way. But to think that others see something the way we ourselves do usually turns out to be an illusion once we make the effort to continue asking what the other person means by the concept in question. Working with blurry concepts makes it possible to exclude thoughts, and thus give fake stability to what is being thought and talked about.

Learning to think is unpleasant, and therefore, there is a great risk that the learning process will be disliked and rejected. This can easily be done by presenting oneself as a 'pragmatist' and saying that delving further into a concept, or a set of concepts, is "too academic or theoretical" an exercise. Depending on how much power somebody has who says so, little change of thinking will ever happen.

What strikes me in such ways of cognitive behavior is the thin line between, on the one hand, the subliminal awareness of the structure of one's thinking and, on the other hand, the commitment to maintain it unaltered (defensively). In every group, you will always find several participants who experience learning the forms of thought by which they produce speech content as strongly "theoretical" and defensively call it "academic". As a result, their enthusiasm about clarifying forms of thought and concepts that represent them rapidly decreases over time, so that in the end, no learning takes place in them, nor in the group they are part of.

### Engaging managers in starting to think differently

To avoid declining enthusiasm about thinking better, I have taken to asking team members to speak about problems they have recently encountered in their business context that left them very unsatisfied with the answers that were provided, either by themselves or others. The best way to start investigating one's own thought processes is to start from a real problem experience. In doing so, it is important that the problem owner himself chooses the type of questions based on which he can start to analyze his thinking.

For this I use the Rethinking Game (De Visch, 2019; [www.connecttransform.be](http://www.connecttransform.be)). When the game is used in a group, each team member selects a possible question from a series of questions of which he believes that an answer to it could enlarge his perspective. The problem owner then chooses from the pre-formulated questions the one that appears as most useful to him. This is followed by a brief brainstorming about possible answers to the question selected. In this way one can immediately experience the power of mind-opening questions and at the same time lower the threshold for starting to think about one's own thinking structures critically.

By first confronting participants with mind-opening questions and letting them choose between questions they find useful for broadening their perspective in that moment, and then letting them think about such questions together, I let them experience the added value of increasing fluidity of thinking on the spot.

Based on what I hear unfolding in participants' thinking, I can then deepen their ways of thinking by pointing to different options of framing a situation or concept. I have found that the perceived usefulness of broadening a perspective being followed at a specific point in time is an essential ingredient in enabling a dialogue about the limitations of one's present thinking and about how remedy them.

Since different levels of thinking structures are interwoven in the mind opening questions I use in the Thinking Game, those involved can choose how much complexity they wish to add to their perspective. This reduces their reticence to play the game and learn therefrom.

Of course, the question always arises *for whom* the experience of more fluid thinking is a good one.

In practice, I notice that when you do this exercise in a team that works together, there are always team members who will convince their colleagues of the need for a broader, different perspective because previously formulated solutions did not work or worked only partially. By itself, this procedure changes the entire group's perspective; it creates a mutual incentive to invest together in a further exploration of forms of thinking. This is a process that is equally essential in learning to be aware of one's train of thought as a sequence of contents generated by the thought forms one has chosen to use.

Clearly, engaging managers in starting to think differently can be undertaken only by an expert user of the thought forms the Dialectical Thoughtform Framework (DTF) provides (Laske 2008). But knowing thought forms by itself is not enough to succeed inspiring people to strive to think more deeply. One must also be a very good listener who can detect in real time what thought forms are being used and which are never used by an individual or in a team, who therefore can truly function as a Critical Facilitator.

### Managers and deeper thinking: a not obvious combination

Managers think and use thoughts to build an understanding of what is relevant and what is related for them. Proceeding in this way results for them in a set of thinking models and frameworks (such as the business model canvas, SWOT analysis, innovation evolution maps, user response analysis, behavioral prototyping, solution storyboarding, etc.). However, the same mistakes tend to be made over and over when using these models.

Managers choose something that is 'real' for them, something they can substantiate with facts, for example) and conclude based on their (rather arbitrary) choice that they have found **the** model of reality. This conclusion is easy for them only because they focus on the mere content, the "what" of a subject matter, but not its "how", its change over time, its relationship to other matters, etc.

Most frameworks provided by science and management consulting do not make explicit the forms of thinking based on which they initially arose. As a result, the frameworks chosen to interpret the real world are subsequently (unconsciously) reinterpreted based on the forms of thinking by which the users of such frameworks happen to interpret reality (given their degree of cognitive development). A SWOT analysis in which only 'context' is considered is poorer than when emerging changes and structures in relationships are accounted for as well.

### Conclusion

I have pointed to some frequent fallacies of logic-analytical thinking that are used to 'get things done' in organizations efficiently, and to make decisions efficiently. Given the experiences I have shared, my conclusion is that it is essential to consider one's thinking as a process that may be too narrow and thus mistaken to do justice to a specific problem (as one will learn the hard way in the end anyway).

Thinking consists of grasping one's own and others' thoughts, and this is achieved by using just a few or a multitude of thinking structures. Thoughts are structures to which we assign a certain reality value, but what has a reality value does not have to be true. The pinnacle of the development of thinking is that we can form thoughts by using many different forms of thought to come close to the reality of the issue we are facing. Our actual thinking processes are, therefore, always incomplete. They trail reality as it is and happens to us. They are nothing but search processes.

Becoming a critical thinker requires becoming aware of how a person's train of thought is developing both over time and within a specific situation, and the DTF Framework of thought forms I use allows me to do so. This unfolding of thought each of us experiences in life and in the workplace is a process for the sake of which one needs to accept personal discomfort and must be able to make oneself vulnerable. And the latter is something that is not given to many managers.