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1 Thinking on Autopilot

Like raindrops on a windowpane

Whether we are talking about decisions in the boardroom or conversation at the dinner table, the way in which we think about challenges and problems is surprisingly similar regardless of the test that we face. We witness this every day although we may not fully register what is happening. It is perhaps easiest to picture what is going on as a raindrop winding its way down a windowpane. The raindrop represents the movement and direction of our thinking once a problem or conversation is explored. In every sense, the raindrop could take almost any route down the window were it not for two important factors. The first is gravity, which puts pressure on the raindrop to take the most direct route, and the second is the path already taken by previous raindrops, which act as channels encouraging subsequent raindrops to follow the same route. Our thinking is the same. We have a limited range of thinking styles that we are pulled towards with almost gravitational force, and we find ourselves stuck in the channels of thinking already created, either by others in the course of conversation or through our own habits. One consequence is that we have a limited repertoire of thinking styles that possess great problem-solving power, but on their own are entirely inadequate. Another is that if we wish to shift the way people think and to lead change we need to work at the roots of the thinking process – the unseen channels that shape our interactions.

For quite some years, I have been running leadership development programs for well-established senior figures and for younger, high-flyers who are identified as likely to travel to the top of their organizations. These have been some of the largest leadership development investments in Europe, engaging people from all sectors. I have, over the years, had the privilege of working with some of the most impressive people around – whether as participants on my programs or the scores of Chief Executive Officers, Chairs, or members of a Board that I have engaged with as part of the program. During this time, I have provided a curriculum, for want of a better word, around the topic of leadership; a subject that still fascinates me after all these

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years. In addition to setting the agenda in terms of development, I have also been able to observe the interaction of people when they have come together to solve problems, to learn from each other, and, at times, to review their life decisions.

An important component of the programs I've led are the numerous occasions when the groups have undertaken live case study examinations of other organizations across the public and private sector. These have usually taken the form of intensive visits to case study organizations, usually focusing on a particular set of issues and involving interviews with staff at every level. In each case time is often spent with customers and clients, stakeholders, the top team, the change agents, and at the front line. The deliverable for these exercises has always been a formal presentation to the sponsoring Chief Executive Officer and usually his or her top team. The requirement for the program participants is to add value to leadership group thinking and ultimately, to influence that group to take action. This is always a tough task, not least because time may be limited to two or three days and the program participants start with more or less zero knowledge of the organization studied.

Setting aside the content of these case studies, there is a great deal of learning that can be derived from the processes adopted by people as they work in groups. Often participants sadly miss the learning about process, instead becoming embroiled in the task. This is not at all unusual, particularly among senior people who have often got to where they are in their organizations through being excellent problem solvers, and not necessarily through being reflective individuals. For me, though, I have had an invaluable opportunity to stand back a little and observe what is going on and to look across different programs and see if patterns emerge in terms of process.

Going back to our live case studies, I have observed two very dominant patterns in the way people come together to explore issues. The first is that as people begin to gather data on a topic, they very quickly start to search for deficiencies in what they see. For example, if in a meeting or through written documentation participants identified the central vision or strategy for an organization, they would then hunt down instances in which that vision or strategy was not being followed. So if an organization had the explicit intention, let's say, to help the homeless, people would try to challenge and test that intention perhaps by questioning whether it meant all homeless people; or what would happen if some homeless people didn't want to be helped; or why wasn't this being done by the government?

A different example is a case study I undertook with a globally renowned company that is well known for its creativity and innovation. The group that visited the company seemed hell bent on challenging whether the company was, in fact, creative at all. For each and every person that was interviewed, participants on the program would report ‘well Mr A wasn’t at all wacky; he was just like you or me’. Or it would be ‘they can talk a good game but I’m just not convinced’.

Another illustration of this behavior is when, on a separate occasion, a very successful and high profile entrepreneur in the media industry was brought in to give a keynote presentation that very well demonstrated the merits of an entrepreneurial approach to business. The group on this occasion represented larger companies and organizations that, in most cases, had existed for at least a handful of decades. There was a mixture of positive and negative murmuring during the presentation until at the end one of the participants quite pointedly asked ‘why are you here and what do you expect us to learn from you?’ Quite apart from the tone that this conveyed, the question that was put was a deficit-focused question. It was intended to find fault and the implication could only have been that the speaker had not, at least for the individual asking the question, convinced them of their view.

The important point that I want to make using these illustrations is that this style of thinking and questioning, whether it is to find deficiencies in an organization’s strategy or to be eternally skeptical about other people’s views is a completely ‘normal’ and routine way of thinking about the world and about business. In my line of business I would, at the drop of a hat, replace deficit-based questioning, for learning-based inquiry, so that every step of the way whether listening to somebody speaking or visiting other companies, the question that people have in their minds is ‘what can I learn from this?’ It would perhaps be different if we were out on the African savannahs and had to quickly detect whether a movement in the long grass was a lion or a bird. In that scenario, the risk or the problem needs to be diagnosed in less than a second, but as exciting and quick-paced as business can be, we should not feel the compulsion to crush what we are looking at as if it were our enemy.

The second very dominant pattern that I see rehearsed time and time again is what I describe as a ‘common sense’ approach to challenges and issues. Common Sense Thinking is about applying a broad and general set of principles to a given situation so as to advance thinking on that subject. It is extraordinarily useful and, in very many situations, will deliver a sensible and helpful answer to your questions.

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However common sense is, of course, a substitute for expertise and specific experience and because we don't always have that expertise to hand, we typically bridge the gap with common sense. An illustration of this is some internal consultancy I lead a few years ago to design, for the first time in the organization, a talent management program to select and develop 'high potential' staff. One of the very many questions to be answered was whether the program, once on its feet, should be low profile or whether it should be, along with the people selected and their promotion performance, openly communicated and shared across the organization – the principle being 'why hide what we are doing?' In discussions with the top team of the organization this was taken as a focus for the thinking and the view was held that, because the organization didn't want to appear underhand or elitist, the program should be visible, high profile, and communication should be bold so as not to imply any dishonesty or favoritism. On the face of it, this seemed a very sensible proposal and one that appeared to fit with the developing culture of the organization – one that was moving towards greater honesty and transparency.

Research undertaken for this work told a different story. The messages emerging from the 20 organizations benchmarked, many of which had operated talent management programs for years, were that because of the enormous sensitivity surrounding high potential programs, success was more likely to be achieved through adopting a lower profile and keeping processes transparent and honest but low key. Further research into first time programs in organizations at a similar cultural transitional stage confirmed the case for a low profile operation.

Once again the point is not whether to have high or low profile talent management programs, rather that Common Sense Thinking can make absolute sense and, on one level, be entirely justifiable but may simply be inadequate.

Table 1.1 highlights the basic repertoire of thinking engines that we use, including Deficit Thinking and Common Sense Thinking processes. In most cases, we deploy two or three of these thinking engines, often not aware of any explicit selection that they are the most appropriate method. They seem to come naturally to us and in every sense we take them for granted. They have served us well for a long time but, because they are adopted almost by default, they may not always be the right choice. They also possess quite considerable limitations if they do not fit with the thinking required. Finally, and arguably most importantly, if we want to shape the way people think and to move people or organizations to a particular destination we need to understand these thinking habits; how they work and what

Table 1.1 Standard thinking repertoire

Standard thinking repertoire	Description
Deficit Thinking	Thinking that focuses on faults, shortcomings, and weaknesses in the target of the discussion
Rational Thinking	Thinking that accentuates the logical component to a problem or challenge. Solutions are characterized as steps in a logical sequence
Sticky Thinking	In the course of conversation, thinking is developed as one person forms an association with the last point of view raised; thoughts stick to each other and shape the thinking process
Common Sense Thinking	Common Sense Thinking is practiced where people seek to solve a problem or challenge by applying general and inexpert knowledge. A rational thinking model is often drawn upon
Binary Thinking	When solutions to challenges or problems are characterized as one thing or another; as opposing ends of a spectrum – the implication being that such options are separate and mutually exclusive
Equity Thinking	Thinking that uses the concept of fairness as its overriding principle

we can do to use them much more effectively. In the next paragraphs, I will explain each of these in a little more detail.

Deficit Thinking

I can think of an occasion, in my personal life, when Deficit Thinking almost certainly saved someone's life. I was on a SCUBA diving holiday with my partner in a remote region famed for its exquisite coral and plankton blooms. We had arrived there in the evening and the following day and everyday afterwards, we had jumped in the boat to be taken to places where the currents went in every direction and fish stood on their tails to stay still. It was beautiful and exciting, with drift dives that seemed to take us at 20 mph just a few feet from the coral walls. It was a morning dive like any other; up at 6.30 am, breakfast, on the boat to take us to the foot of an old volcano. The dive went very well, in fact so well that afterwards, as I sunned myself on the top of the deck, my partner plunged back into the water to do some impromptu snorkeling. Like me she was an addict and didn't want to

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waste the time it took to decompress before the afternoon dive. The boat had a skeleton crew on it because of elections that were taking place on the mainland. The boat hadn't been moored and so the captain, also our dive leader, intermittently started the engine to take us away from the coral that grew close to the surface. The boat drifted towards it every now and then and, with the help of the engine, returned to its original site.

I distinctly remember lying on my back and feeling truly relaxed. I had got over the jet lag and felt at one with the water when I heard screams from down below. Something had happened and the boat's engine made some deep rumblings. Amid even more shrill screams, I jumped off the top deck to see my partner being lifted vertically out of the water by the burly, six-foot-tall German captain. She had been hit by the boat's propeller as it had drifted into the coral and the engine had been started without warning. She looked shocked but undamaged until we took her wet suit off. The propeller hadn't touched her, but the force of the water spun by the propeller had cut through her wet suit and deep into her leg leaving a very long cut about 9 inches across, and deep enough to cut into the muscle. It was horrifying. There were other large wounds elsewhere on her legs.

We frantically called a speedboat to take us to the shore; it collected us and, as it arrived on the mainland, we found ourselves in a makeshift ambulance that trundled to the hospital, each moment costing us valuable time. We arrived at the hospital and my partner was immediately ushered onto another makeshift piece of equipment, this time an operating table. At this point we found ourselves, despite the shock and the ever-growing seriousness of the situation, demanding that we saw all the implements that were to be used. We questioned every step of the process, 'is he a trained surgeon?' 'Are those needles clean?' (They weren't, and we asked them to be changed which they did politely), 'are you sure those scalpels are clean?' (Some weren't which were also changed). The repair work conducted by the doctors was, in the event, excellent. The less than sterile nature of some of the equipment was a serious concern but we think we managed to track down all of the offending items having them replaced. My partner fully recovered although the ordeal wasn't over as we encountered numerous difficulties negotiating with airlines for them to provide sufficient seat space to take my partner home with her leg sticking out at right angles, but that's another story.

The outcome, given the circumstances, was a good one. Along the way our Deficit Thinking, for example in relentlessly looking for faults or risks in the cleanliness of the equipment used, served us

extremely well and may have made the difference, particularly in light of the extreme humidity in the country, between life and death or at least serious illness.

Deficit Thinking, as illustrated by this example, is an incredibly powerful thinking mode to adopt. It is designed principally to help us detect danger, to secure our own survival. It is useful too in domestic or business settings. Every time we evaluate something we need to understand where the weaknesses lie, what too are the risks. Picking a good builder needs an eye for unreliability or untidiness. Interviewing applicants for a job needs an eye for incompetence or untrustworthiness. Listening to a sales pitch needs an ear for dishonesty or important omissions.

Not every scenario though is suitable for Deficit Thinking wherein the wider challenge lies. There is no doubt that we overuse this style of thinking. Almost every scenario that calls upon us to think somehow attracts it. One of the many complications in using the deficit model is in the impact on people when it is deployed. In working with young highflyers, particularly in more established sectors such as the legal field, engineering, audit and accountancy, banking, and administrative functions I have noticed the overuse of the Deficit Thinking model in communications. An example is where I have worked with teams within organizations to deliver their perspective to the top team, (often based on group research), of how the organization might develop and improve. This is commonly done with highflyers to encourage their engagement with corporate and strategic issues at an ever-earlier stage in their careers. In this kind of situation I have seen, in almost every occasion, groups providing to the top team, in considerable detail, a long list of problems-to-be-solved. Excellent analyses of organizational weaknesses in leadership, culture, structure, communications, policies, motivation, mission, vision, strategy, values, change programs, and more besides, and always very little in terms of solutions. The mountain that the organization needs to climb is described in fine detail. The rocks, the loose scree, the slippery mud, the thorny bushes, the potholes, the wet grass, the altitude sickness, and the stories of failures from the last party that tried to climb the mountain. The result, of course, is not only an account that provides far fewer solutions than problems but a presentation that leaves the audience and the customer exhausted and without the will to carry on. The deficit model, for all its strength, drains the life out of all of us leaving a garbage tip of woes for us to contemplate. This is particularly important in times of change when leaders often over-emphasize the weaknesses found in the organization as a motivation,

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a rationale for change. Of course, staff that feel directly implicated in those weaknesses don't always have the same hunger or energy to change as the top team.

The deficit model, like the other basic thinking engines outlined in this chapter, has become part of our thinking habit and this is where it becomes dangerous to us. We adopt the deficit model usually without hesitation and, like a knight wielding a sword, it is used as often to kill our opponent, as it is to open letters. Sooner or later, we too become the victim of our choice of weapon and we turn it on ourselves – finding flaws in ourselves; prodding at weaknesses, exposing our own wounds, and toying with them. Many years ago I shared an office with a colleague who at the best of times was cantankerous. He had a son in his teens and it was clear from the often-short conversations he held with him over the phone that the relationship wasn't a good one. It came to a head one day when my colleague after a fairly heated telephone exchange said: 'the thing is son, you're "yesterday's man!"' They were horrible words for me to hear, but I am sure considerably more damaging to the teenager. The deficit model is so routine for us we forget how destructive it can be, and we forget too how little attention we are paying to solutions and offering help while we are demolishing the subject matter.

It is useful here to touch on the subject of habit since this is what is leading us, ironically without thinking, to adopting our thinking styles. In their book *The Social Construction of Reality*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann illustrate this well:

All human activity is subject to habitualization. Any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can be reproduced with an economy of effort ... Habitualization carries with it the important psychological gain that choices are narrowed. While in theory there may be a hundred ways to go about the project of building a canoe out of matchsticks, habitualization narrows these down to one. (p. 52)

Robert Wuthnow, elaborating on the theories of the social anthropologist Mary Douglas, extends this point a little further:

The moral order is so infused into our structuring of reality that activities such as sorting, tidying, cleaning and putting things in their place in general act to re-enforce not only the structure of social reality but of moral sentiments too. That moral component of assigning reality to different categories becomes particularly

apparent when things get out of place. At that point we are socially obliged to reset the structure of things and thereby re-enforce the fabric of social and moral order. (p. 87)

What is argued here is that not only can our practices become habits that, by their nature, narrow our options (thus making those practices efficient), but also that our tendency to reduce, to order, and to have things in their place (in this case using a narrow range of thinking practices in conversation), carries with it a form of ‘moral’ force that this is the right thing to do. For people therefore in a conversational setting to introduce modes of thinking and discussion that fall outside of the tacitly accepted repertoire, invites a negative response almost as if the morals of conduct had been transgressed.

The next time you are at a meeting, quietly count the number of times the conversation turns to deficits. Observe also the impact this has on the direction of the conversation and the energy levels generated. Notice too how the deficit thinking process is entirely understood as a legitimate mode of discussion without once being referred to or called upon.

Rational Thinking

In Cincinnati there is an independent non-profit organization called the Association for Rational Thought. The organization has been around for almost 15 years and is committed to ‘balanced and rational exploration of the world’. In addition to its central aim, it also encourages well-informed evaluation of fringe-science, pseudo-science and paranormal claims:

While many of us are not scientists, we embrace the scientific method as humankind’s best invention for seeking knowledge. Sceptics are not cynics. We don’t simply reject every unusual idea. We do insist that unusual ideas require considerable supporting evidence before we accept them as being true.

There is a similar society run by students at Stanford University (called RATT). In their statement of philosophy they state:

All of us agree that any belief, even society’s sacred cows, is potentially up for scrutiny, and we strive to base our responses to ideas always on the available evidence. Above all, we would

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like to encourage a scientific, rational outlook on life and to further skills necessary to survive in today's pseudoscientific information age.

In the divisions of IBM responsible for software development there are groups of people named as 'rational thought leaders' who debate and platform their views on the value of rational thinking in the business. The group have authored numerous books on the subject with titles ranging from *The Rational Unified Process Made Easy* to a newsletter called *The Rational Edge*.

There is even a Rationalist Press Association based in London that 'promotes reason and evidence in the understanding of life' and draws from a tradition of rational thought stretching back to the seventeenth century.

Rational thought is another of our dominant thinking habits, reaching for some, as these real life examples illustrate, an almost evangelical status in the modern world. One definition of Rationalism is 'the belief or principle that actions and opinions should be based on reason rather than on emotion or religion'¹. The process of applying rational thinking draws upon logic as a fundamental engine and upon well established techniques such as deductive method, where hypotheses are tested against available data and evidence; and inductive method, where data is found and built from the bottom up into hypotheses and grounded theories. In the practice of rational thinking, at least in business settings, we find ourselves following some trusted approaches such as describing, comparing, spotting repeated events and patterns, looking for sequences, considering the weight of evidence, extrapolating and drawing inferences, exploring association and causality between different data, breaking down issues into their component parts, and always testing our thinking against a model of 'reasonableness'.

The use of a rational model in thinking and in interaction is clearly a powerful weapon in our armory. Without it we would be lost. But, like our Deficit Thinking approach it has become a habit and, as such, its merits and shortfalls have somehow slipped under the radar.

I am reminded of the Myers Briggs Type Inventory tool, which is widely used in business to profile individual, team and sometimes in organizational preferences. The tool is based on the work of Carl Jung who made his thoughts explicit in the book *Psychological Type* first printed in 1921. It was later developed in the 1940s by a mother and daughter team, who developed Jung's theory of psychological type into four polarities which were labeled as 'Introvert-Extrovert'; 'Intuition-Sensing'; 'Thinking-Feeling'; and 'Judging-Perceiving'.

It is estimated that more than four million people take the Myers Briggs test each year.

It is interesting in the context of the rational thinking model because it helps to illuminate the blind spots that are not always apparent to us as we unthinkingly step into rational mode. The Myers Briggs polarity of most interest here is the ‘Thinking – Feeling’ continuum. Those of us that have a ‘Thinking’ preference tend to accentuate the rational side of our thinking. We like to analyze pros and cons, and then be consistent and logical in progressing our thoughts. We like to be impersonal and to apply an objective perspective to a given situation. Those of us with a ‘Feeling’ preference attend more to the feelings and values of others. We are more empathetic and draw upon our own appreciation for relationships and the views people hold. Our thinking is not illogical; rather it values how people might be affected by decisions; how harmony and consensus might be achieved, and how people feel.

Those of you that have participated in any form of training that helps you deal with the media will know that the first lesson, when communicating difficult news to an audience, is to always speak to how people are feeling. In the horrific bombings in London on 7 July 2005, the Prime Minister halted the G8 summit in Scotland to speak to the country. The announcement from 10 Downing Street was:

This is a terrible and tragic atrocity that has cost many innocent lives. I have just attended a meeting of the Government’s emergency committee. I received a full report from the ministers and officials responsible. There will be an announcement made in respect of the various services; in particular we hope the Underground, as far as is possible and rail and bus services are up and running as soon as possible.

I would like to express my profound condolences to the families of the victims and to those who are casualties of this terrorist act. I would also like to thank the emergency services that have been magnificent today in every respect. There, of course, will now be the most intense Police and Security Service action to make sure we bring those responsible to justice. I would also pay tribute to the stoicism and resilience of the people of London who have responded in a way typical of them.

The speech was exactly the right tone to pick and connected to the feelings of people in London and across the country on that day. It is

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an excellent illustration too of the value of understanding human emotions when you think about what to do or say next. Business has a predominance of the Myers Briggs ‘Thinking’ preference. In fact, from my experience, I would say that at least 75 per cent of the business people that I have met (and whose MBTI profile I have known) possess the ‘Thinking’ preference. I would also say that they slip into the rational mode of thinking with the ease of a penguin into the cold, black sea.

The dominance of the rational thinking model is such a puzzle for me. Let us, for a moment, think about some of the biggest and most important decisions we take in life. They might include who we choose to marry or live with, what house or car we buy, the friends we make, whether to have children, or even where to go on holiday. All of these are important decisions; many of them are very costly and all of them require considerable planning. However, who you fall in love with tends not to be determined by a rational evaluation of the options; the friends that you make and keep arises from how you feel when in the company of those friends; the last house that you bought probably just felt good – maybe it was light and airy or made you feel safe; your holiday destinations probably tap into your need for excitement and exploration. Whatever the reasons and whatever the motivation it is clear that in big important life decisions while rationality is of course part of our thinking process, matters of the heart have an equal if not larger role to play.

Why, then, in business and in organizations which both employ people and typically deliver products and services to people, is feeling and emotional state rarely factored in to the thinking process? Worse still, why is it regarded by many as a second order question? The thinking being: let’s get the system or the design right first and then think about the people in the system. It just seems crazy.

I once participated in a development program along with senior figures from a mix of management consultancies. The aim of the program was to help develop the skills of consultants working at board level. Much of the focus was on how to build relationships in order to become a ‘trusted advisor’ and to do so by helping to shift the thinking of the board-level player to a better place. The activity took the form of a classic developmental method to teach coaching. In this scenario, there was a coach, a problem-holder (the coachee), a series of observers each with different roles, and a trained facilitator. After each session, usually lasting 30–45 min, the participants would switch roles and keep doing so until, with the guidance of the facilitator, the learning was well

and truly absorbed. One particular session offered some fascinating insights and went a little like this:

Coach: So David, it would be good if you could we could talk about some of the challenges you're facing at the moment.

Coachee: Well, we've had a very difficult time of late with a company to which we sub-contracted a major piece of audit work to undertake on our behalf and frankly they have made a mess of it. They've been bullish and not really understood the client's business. They haven't built any trust at any level, and as a result, they've annoyed the client and this has been brought to the attention of the Audit Committee that has made us look bad too.

Coach: And this has generated some specific problems for you?

Coachee: Absolutely, not least because I stuck my neck out and deliberately selected this company because I recognized that they would be tough and would place high expectations on the client. I am very keen to bring this client into the 21st century and this company was a perfect way to do this.

Coach: Have you raised this with the partner in the sub-contracted firm?

Coachee: Yes, we've been very straight with them. We've made it clear that they have handled it badly. It's been difficult for me though because I have been a strong supporter of the high standards that they operate.

Coach: You mentioned the Audit Committee. How displeased were they?

Coachee: They were livid. They are a strong Audit Committee and of course they represent all of the top-level players that we need to work with. We need to win their respect and this is very embarrassing.

Coach: Could you arrange for another partner to take client responsibility to replace the current partner?

Coachee: Well we could I suppose, but we are already committed and it may look even worse for us if we changed tack now. Besides they are the right firm and it's the right partner for the job, it is just that they've started very badly and have damaged our reputation in the process

Coach: At what point in the process was it apparent to you that things were going wrong?

Coachee: I think we first heard some murmurings from the Finance Director a couple of months ago. It was in a meeting about an entirely different matter and he made a couple of cryptic comments

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about the contractor. I didn't understand them at the time, but in retrospect, I suppose I should have pursued them.

The process continued for some time, seeming to find no way forward until the facilitator intervened to halt the session. Before she commenced the review, however, she invited the coachee to stay in role and asked them one question: 'it sounds like you have a lot personally invested in this. You clearly care about the helping the client a great deal and, in many ways, you've put your own reputation on the line to do this. How must that feel?' The question provoked a stunning response. The coachee looked as if a huge weight had been lifted from their shoulders. His eyes teared a little and he nodded furiously in recognition spilling out a river of feelings on the subject. It transpired that the coachee felt incredibly alone; that he knew that he had made the right decision to select the contractor and should hold his nerve but he had been plagued with doubts; the coachee also explored whether the client too, and even the Audit Committee may have unexpressed feelings about the new arrangements and the new world. At the conclusion of the session, the coachee left the room clear about the way forward and energized to take action.

In short, the rational model of inquiry was never going to move the thinking of the coachee forward. His feelings on the subject were a critical component of the problem and the process of searching and offering hypotheses in the rational mode may never have got to the solution. Looking back on the events, it was crystal clear to that coach that the coachee was flagging up the issues from the outset. His references to personal risk and various feelings of embarrassment and doubt couldn't have been better articulated. Sadly, because of the limitations of using the rational model, they were falling on deaf ears.

This example illustrates something else for us too. It offers a particular pattern that is common to rational thinking whenever an individual (or group) is engaged in problem solving. It might be in providing mentoring advice to a colleague or solving some difficulties in another part of the business. In the example the coach, in their hunger to help, treated the problem as if it were a broken engine. In order to diagnose what needed to happen next, the coachee systematically selected a series of diagnostic questions that he thought would deliver the information he needed to come up with the right answer; almost as if once he knew as much as the coachee he would, of course, see the light. I call this subset of rational thinking 'information grab'. It's a bit like playing the popular children's game 'Animal, Vegetable, Mineral', where the aim is

to guess, using 20 questions, which animal, mineral, or vegetable the other person is thinking. Questions can only be answered with ‘yes’ or ‘no’ and sooner or later, the options will have been narrowed to the point where the answer is obvious.

In more complex situations, where the process of thinking is inextricably bound to the decisions reached, we have to be a little more sophisticated. Firstly, the rational model, by definition, tends not to view feelings as relevant data to the problem in-hand. Secondly, problems are rarely solved by simply possessing all of the ‘relevant’ facts. If that were the case, then in the example used the coachee wouldn’t need any help. It is, of course, the insights you bring to those facts that make the difference. Thirdly, as a recipient of the ‘information grab’ approach (assuming you are dealing with people rather than conducting paper-based research), you feel disempowered, less ownership of the issues as you pass them to another and you feel like a dry husk once every droplet of information has been sucked out of you. After that, the problem-solver needs to come up with some pretty amazing solutions to have made the process worthwhile.

As you observe interactions between people at work or elsewhere, consider how much time is spent in rational mode as compared to exploring feelings, values, or personal motivations. Watch what happens to the advancement of thinking on the occasions feelings are tapped into.

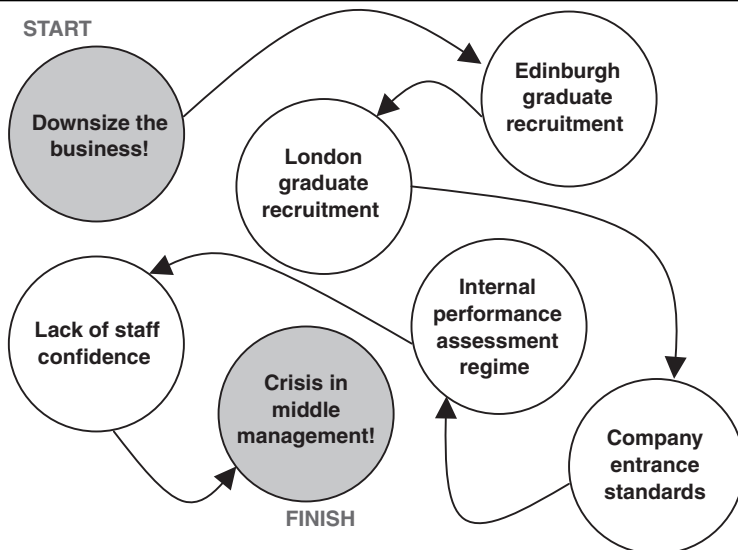
Sticky Thinking

Have you ever noticed that, despite how much you can find a pop song annoying, repetitive, and puerile, you catch yourself one day, perhaps walking around a grocery store, humming it? The second most comforting thing in this is that you are not alone in having this experience; the first is that you will probably have inadvertently passed it on to someone else and, as you pass the meats counter, you will hear another poor victim whistling the tune. It’s as if as soon as something catches your attention it sticks to your mind like a Post-It note and it takes quite some effort to shake it off.

In conversations too this happens frequently and with great rapidity. It might be a meeting of the board to discuss the prospect of downsizing unprofitable areas of the business. As an aside, someone briefly mentions some difficulties in recruiting local graduates at the Edinburgh branch. Someone at the table expresses concern as the London offices have a surfeit of graduate applications. The discussion leads in to

the challenge of differentiating higher performing universities from poorer universities. The Finance Director comments that when he left university and joined the company, there was a lower company requirement for degree performance: ‘A second class degree in those days was perfectly acceptable’. The Human Resources Director adds that not only have the entrance requirements risen, the entry assessment procedures have become considerably tougher. A colleague reflects that while the organizational changes have made entrance assessment more stringent, the new performance appraisal system for existing staff, with its new relative assessment regime, has caused considerable distress among some staff that feel the system is unduly harsh and unfair. A colleague raises the point that this has knocked the confidence of many middle managers as subjects and administrators of the system. They are desperately trying to motivate people at a time of rapid change only to have a new, highly critical system to implement. ‘Our middle managers are the workhorse of the organization’ says the Chief Executive Officer, ‘this needs our urgent attention!’ Before the group know it, 30 minutes have passed, large amounts of money spent in senior staff time, and no headway has been made on the original proposition for the meeting. Table 1.2 represents the sequence of events.

Table 1.2 Illustration of Sticky Thinking



Sticky Thinking is not always contained to single conversations. In some cases, sticky thoughts can stay with us for days. A friend of mine had a boss that suffered from, as my friend joked, ‘impression-in-a-pillow’ syndrome, which referred to his apparent compulsion to be unduly influenced by conversations he had had a few days earlier (like an impression left in a pillow). One example was when his boss had met a senior figure whose background was in marketing. They had clearly touched on the subject of market segmentation and so at almost every opportunity, and even when it wasn’t terribly appropriate, the prospect of segmenting the market would be applied to: the groupings that made up society, the internal customers within the organization, the division of books in the library. If you wanted to be in the favor of the boss that week, mentioning market segmentation would significantly raise your stock. Next week though, after the boss had met with a leading academic who spoke of ‘operationalizing’ social theories, i.e. turning theory into practice, being better at delivery was *really about* operationalizing the concept of ‘earned value management’; cost cutting was about operationalizing the ‘theory of constraints’.

This is different though from having a pet subject or more seriously having principles and insights that you want to bring to the table (principles that you may offer repeatedly to help to advance thinking). By Sticky Thinking, I mean those interactions where we find the conversation wandering, through associations, from one subject to another. And this is a very serious and real issue on which to focus. Research conducted by MCI Worldcom into the time we spend in meetings highlights some startling results.

UK businesses waste enormous amounts of time and money on unproductive meetings, according to recent research. The research, commissioned by MCI WorldCom Conferencing and carried out by the Research Business International, finds the typical busy professional attends nearly 60 meetings a month, of which more than 10 per cent involve travel out of town. A typical out-of-town six-person meeting costs £1,645. This includes significant “soft” costs, such as lost productivity while participants are travelling to and arranging meetings, which must be considered for a true evaluation of meetings.

“Meetings in the UK: a study of trends, costs and attitudes towards business travel and teleconferencing, and their impact on productivity” draws on the government’s Office for National Statistics’ Labour Force Survey and the meeting habits of more

than 400 professionals in middle and senior management positions ... This research reveals that heavy meeting-goers find it difficult to maintain their commitments: 87 per cent have missed meetings, 80 per cent have daydreamed and 23 per cent have dozed off during meetings. Travelling to meetings also affects professionals' welfare: 28 per cent say they are more stressed when travelling to meetings, with 50 per cent saying they are concerned about work piling up while they are away.

In the United States, according to the Wall Street Journal's report on Wharton Centre For Applied Research (November 2004):

The average CEO in the United States spends 17 hours a week in meetings that cost the company \$42,500 per year. Senior executives spend 23 hours a week in meetings and cost up to \$46,000 per year each. Middle managers spend 11 hours a week in meetings and cost up to \$20,000 a year each

Taking these statistics alone and imagining even a small organization comprised of 1,000 staff and, lets say, one Chief Executive Officer, 50 senior executives, and 120 middle managers, we would expect the company to spend \$4.7m each year attending meetings, and this excludes the cost incurred in meetings by the remaining 829 members of staff below middle manager. Highlighting the significance of the point, there are numerous products available on the market, and many via the Internet, which provide quick calculations of the cost of company meetings. In fact, some companies offer to install digital recording equipment that will automatically capture, calculate, and disseminate the costs of meetings as they take place. Dramatic reductions in meeting costs have been reported where this has taken place.

In the next meeting you attend, draw a series of circles on a piece of paper and each time the conversation shifts in focus, write down a two or three word description in each bubble. When you get to the end of the meeting, observe how often shifts in thinking are influenced by the associations people make rather than the contribution that can be made to the problem in hand.

Common Sense Thinking

Common sense is another thinking habit of ours that possesses enormous power. It involves applying general principles often taken from experience or borrowed from similar situations to bring help to a

problem or challenge. It is an approach that draws heavily on the rational model and, in particular, it makes good use of logical deduction and logical induction. However, as with all of our habits, we rarely pause to think whether it is fit for purpose; whether in fact, common sense is good enough.

The American Independence advocate Thomas Paine, along with most dictionary definitions, describes common sense as ‘beliefs or propositions that seem, to most people, to be prudent and of sound judgment’. Other definitions refer to ‘conventional wisdom’, ‘native good judgment’, or ‘practical sense’. What is well recognized is that common sense does not rely on expert or specialized knowledge, rather it is something of a numbers game – the more people that hold a view, the more commonly held that view is, the more we can ascribe the descriptor of common sense to that view.

I do not wish to give the impression that popular perspectives are lacking. The wonderful book *The Wisdom of Crowds* by James Surowiecki beautifully illuminates the value of common-thought. He starts his book with the popular TV quiz show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* and, in reference to the ‘ask the audience’ option available to all contestants, he argues that where individual thought is pitted against group intelligence, the group will always win; the popular, commonly held sense will always win through.

The Delphi technique, used by the RAND Corporation since the late 1960s, added another dimension to the notion of common sense by providing a methodology for assembling experts across different but related subject areas, to reach consensus – a common view – on key decisions. One application of the technique involves inviting a group of people to answer a question that may be unrelated to their specialities. For example, it might be to ask a group of zoo keepers ‘how many cars are manufactured in Japan each year?’ Individually each participant would write his or her estimate on a Post-It. After each round, the estimates would be shared with the group and then the process repeated again. The combined contribution and subsequent adjustments to estimates would, over time, lead the group to an accurate prediction. It’s a fascinating method that delivers startling results.

In companies across the world we have seen, in increasing numbers, much greater use of large group problem-solving; and not just group processes as a means to ‘buy-in’ staff to the latest management edict. Groups have been engaged in activities that had previously been firmly in the domain of the top team – strategy formulation, determining the organization’s vision, and even major decisions about growth and contraction. Organizations doing this have been as

diverse as BBC who have engaged literally thousands of employees in the business of the Corporation and Nokia phones in Finland. The program of activity in each case has been to draw upon and build common sense ideas about how to take organizations forward.

Common sense is good and it works well for us, particularly where explicit thought has been given, in the case of the Delphi technique and the facilitation methodologies that accompany large group work, to how best to tap into common sense. The area, though, that needs greatest attention is in the habit of common sense – the day-to-day setting where common sense too often rules supreme.

My interest in leadership has grown over the years, not only from a professional perspective, but also on a much deeper level. It is a subject that fascinates me for its complexity, it's joining of the personal and the business and for the way it has as many expert commentators as it does common-sense commentators. Leadership development, and in fact all training and development, is the same – everyone seems to have a view (unfortunately often negative). With history and more immediately our TV screens littered with magnificent leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Winston Churchill, and Gandhi people feel as inclined to offer their wisdom on leadership as easily as they might talk about the latest TV program or the weather.

My role in designing leadership development experiences has engendered within me quite an acute sense of the difference between what sounds right and what works – often two entirely different things. It sounds right to many of us that being intelligent, that having high standards and being charismatic will help to make a good leader. Maybe even showing 110 per cent commitment to the cause will help too. These are common-sense judgments about what matters. Equally, in terms of development activities it sounds right too that emerging leaders will benefit from teaching by the finest academics and practitioners available. Perhaps the training format could be a speaking session from an academic followed by a 'Q & A'. To denote the importance of this maybe too some sessions should be held over dinner. Again, these are common sense notions of what seems right.

In the examples used here, there is good reason to challenge all of the common sense notions of what constitutes good leadership and to firmly question the design of appropriate interventions. Let us explore in a little detail some of the common sense ingredients of leadership:

Intelligence Intelligence is clearly an important pre-requisite for operating at a senior level in any organization. However, it is important to explore what kind of intelligence

leaders might need in order to help the organization to be successful. There are numerous models that seek to capture different dimensions of intelligence, but I would like to refer to two types of intelligence that are quite different but very important. The first, Emotional Intelligence, is now very well understood and was brought to public attention through Daniel Goleman's book of the same name, published in 1995. Goleman brought together research from different fields that convincingly argued that IQ is not a good predictor of job performance. Instead, our ability to handle frustration, control emotions, and get along with other people seemed to matter more. Research originally conducted at Berkeley University in the 1950s and then repeated 40 years later concluded that social and emotional abilities were four times more important than IQ in determining professional success and prestige. For all of the emphasis our education system and our recruitment processes in business have given to more conventional forms of intelligence, this groundbreaking work concluded that common sense, in deducing that IQ was of primary importance, had failed us.

The second form of intelligence is highlighted by the work of Harry Schroeder formerly of Princeton University, New Jersey and developed by Tony Cockerill formerly of London Business School. This work offered the term 'conceptual flexibility' as one of three crucial ingredients in thinking for leaders. It refers to an ability to assimilate complex and often conflicting data; to be able to simultaneously adopt different perspectives on a subject and to accommodate those perspectives into the way we see the world. It is a very modern way of thinking and encourages us to see the part (perhaps of a business) and the whole at the same time. It invites us to see interconnectedness and to value alternative perspectives. It is a form of thinking that, in many ways, is not common to us. The important point here is that the research shows that it is this (and the previous example of emotional intelligence) that leads to results in business and without properly understanding what you mean by intelligence, or without having a firm

basis to believe that the input variable leads to the desired outcome, your views, as sensible as they seem, are no more than speculation.

Charisma

The research undertaken by James Collins and Jerry Porras and published in 1994 in their book *Built to Last* is now well known. Jim Collins proposed that, despite the commonly held notion that charisma is essential to leadership, it could in fact be the death knell for an organization. Their research looked to companies in the United States that had prospered over time and had, over decades, been sustainable and continually on top of their game. He then looked to the characteristics of the chief executives to find that those companies with the greatest staying power had a mixture of leaders, very few of whom could be described as charismatic. His work had surprised and challenged pre-conceptions about what made for good leadership.

High standards and having 110 per cent commitment

These final categories appear on the face of it to be sensible. Who could argue with the position that having high standards would improve performance; who could disagree that 110 per cent commitment would help? In many ways, experience tells us that possessing these qualities can mean trouble. Both of these qualities are strongly associated with a pacesetter style of leadership where the leader expects a lot of their staff. Leaders with this style can be highly critical of below (their) standard performance, can tend to micro-manage and create an organizational climate that is judged by staff to be constraining and damaging in the long term. A typical picture is performance that rises initially, but drops sharply once the pressure is off. Leadership then takes a hit in terms of loyalty and staff tend to feel managed rather than led. In short, the qualities listed can sound right but very often they don't deliver results.

Academic or practitioner teaching followed by 'Q & A'

It is a classic developmental design to have speaker input followed by a Q & A. It is entirely understandable too that so many leadership development interventions take this form. While being commonly held as the way to teach leadership, it can be so wide of the mark in achieving any shift in learning or performance.

The point of reference for this design is typically school or university where the ‘chalk and talk’ style is normal business. The problem of course is that the school and university environment is focused on passing down knowledge to students who seek to make sense of the lessons. In the world of leadership, certainly in my experience, the area that almost always needs most attention is behavioral change, not intellectual topping-up. The habit can be very hard to break but sees millions of pounds each year poorly spent and business results barely touched

This is, of course, one example of how Common Sense Thinking can find its way into places it shouldn’t be. But in my experience, I see common sense being used too much in organizations and people with generalist abilities turning their hands to anything from marketing to finance or from client management to IT systems. And even within such disciplines, general experience and the thinking that goes with it too often replaces insight and demonstrable expertise.

There is a delightful quotation used by the educationalist John Dewey in his book *How We Think* first published in 1910:

The story is told of a man in slight repute for intelligence, who, desiring to be chosen selectman in his New England town, addressed a knot of neighbours in this wise way ‘I hear you don’t believe I know enough to hold office. I wish you to understand that I am thinking about something or other most of the time’ (p. 2)

As you speak to colleagues and friends about any topic over the next few weeks, ask yourself how they know what they are saying. Question whether they are offering views born of knowledge, or expertise, or common sense. Think too which particular arms of the business in which you work are viewed as more susceptible to Common Sense Thinking and consider relative to your own area of the business how true this might be?

Binary Thinking

The word ‘binary’ describes a system that has only two possible options or digits, normally 0 and 1. It is a system that is essential in technology and underpins the processing protocol in all modern computers. The thinking behind this relates to electrical circuitry that

can have only two possible states, either on or off. A simple example is the light in a room that can either be turned on or off – there is no in-between point, and the selection of one of the two options available excludes the other from being possible. It is in the combination and sequencing of binary coding that technological systems can deliver such immense processing power.

I use the principle of a binary system as a metaphor to explore another of our dominant thinking habits – Binary Thinking.

In almost every activity of life I see the broader principles of Binary Thinking being reflected. In human biology, the heart works by contracting and pumping blood around the body, and then relaxing to allow blood to enter the heart. This binary action, almost like a light turned on and off, is repeated for the rest of our lives. Our lungs do the same. As we breathe in, our lungs inflate and oxygen is extracted from the air; and as we breathe out, carbon dioxide is expelled from the body. Neither can, nor should, happen at the same time. In sport, the competition between two players whether boxing or tennis or even chess relies on a binary principle of either/or. I win or you win; it simply can't be both. In accountancy, the principle of double-entry bookkeeping requires that a transaction be denoted as either a debit or a credit. Even its counter-entry has to follow the same rule. In criminal law, judgements are based on guilt or innocence. In movies we have good and evil. And in war we have enemies and allies.

It is no surprise at all that our method of thinking too has a binary component to it. Binary Thinking is of great value when we truly believe that the most appropriate way to represent the problems or solutions that we face is to conceive of two, mutually exclusive options. A typical characterization of problems/possibilities that we face is outlined in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3 Typical characterizations of binary problems/possibilities

To innovate	To be conservative
To centralize decision-making	To devolve decision-making
To change	To stay as we are
To be autocratic	To be democratic
To grow	To contract
To lead	To follow
To be quick	To be slow
To do it ourselves	To sub-contract

Over the years, I have worked with a range of executive coaches, many of whom have also provided career counseling for senior executives who feel that they have come to a crossroads in their lives. I am reminded of one occasion on which I wanted to test out the skills of a particular executive coach, and to do so I asked if they would be willing to explore the career options that I once had. This was quite some time ago, when I had assumed that I would want a career with a path that took me towards working for a large multi-national perhaps in the field of consultancy. The session was informed by an exercise that I undertook alone to identify the times in my life, whether in work or elsewhere, when I was in 'flow'. The concept of 'flow' was developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a psychology professor at the University of Chicago, who proposed that optimal performance in all of us occurs at a time when we are fully immersed in an activity to the point that we achieve an almost Zen like sense of oneness with that activity. In such a mental state, time flies by, there is a falling away of ego and there is a great sense of achievement. In lay terms, this has been described as 'being in the zone' and 'in the groove', and it provides an excellent basis on which to explore future career decisions.

In the rather lengthy experiences that I described, of which I first couldn't make sense, I was struck by what seemed to be an extraordinary pattern of events. The first was my love for SCUBA diving that I described as a 'flow' activity because of the way in which it was a total experience that gave me a sense of absolute freedom along with absolute responsibility for my well being. I talked about the need for moment-to-moment alertness of my body movement in the water, the shifts in current, the air tank that I needed to monitor, and the necessity to communicate without words but with complete clarity to fellow divers. I also wrote about the apparent chaos of fish society that, as I came to know it better, I appreciated was highly ordered. Fish would literally queue, like at a barbershop, in order to have barnacles and debris removed from their scales by an attendant cleaner wrasse. Remoras would swim with sharks to clean their sandpaper skins with the reward of occasional scraps of food. The synergy was a joy to watch. Another 'flow' experience was the time I spent writing a thesis on the culture of organizations. This was a hefty piece of work and took me some six months to write. I described my 'flow' experience as one where, within a bounded time period, I had freedom to focus and craft the thesis as I saw fit. On the one hand, whatever I saw as being germane to the subject I could introduce or research further. Whatever theory or methodology I thought was useful came under my gaze. On the other hand, I paid regular attention to the

conventions of the work, the sociological discipline to which I was working and the pressure to deliver something on time, to a fixed word count and to an externally applied standard.

The quandary that I found myself in when I reviewed these and other ‘flow’ moments was that they appeared contradictory. I appeared to revel in freedom and to be more alive than I ever was when I was my own boss. But at the same time, all of my flow experiences took place where the setting was bounded and constrained. In my SCUBA diving example, my experience was limited by available air in the tank. In my thesis example, the work was subject to stiff external standards, to a rigid word limit and to a time deadline. The pleasure I derived from exploring the apparent chaos of the underwater world was matched by the pleasure I felt when I understood that in fact the chaos was order; that fish were members of a society with norms not unlike human society. I concluded with some discomfort that I was most alive and effective when I could innovate and be free, but also when I had to follow the rules and be constrained.

At the time I had accepted these as contradictions and I pondered for quite a while what they meant. With the help of the executive coach, I came to appreciate that these were not contradictory at all; they weren’t mutually exclusive, paradoxical, or inconsistent. Above all, they were not, as I had imagined before that time, either/or options. If I were to steer my career choices based on my flow preferences, it was simply a matter of finding organizations and positions where within an established and strong structure, perhaps even a traditional organization, I would be allowed space to operate and the freedom to innovate. And, as I discovered, there were and are a surprising number that fit the description.

Returning to Table 1.3 and its typical characterizations of binary options, I cannot tell you how many times I have heard these apparent inconsistencies being presented as either/or possibilities. I imagine, too, that in your daily lives you hear them being routinely mentioned. Dr Barry Johnson has undertaken a wealth of excellent work in this area under the heading of Polarity Management. His work forms an important distinction between ‘problems’ which he explains may be solved by single solutions (that may fall on either side of a binary division) and ‘polarities’ which are interdependent variables and, as such, any change to one will affect the other. For example, experience tells us that the likely outcome of centralizing decision-making will, over time, be the corrosion of local responsibility, local knowledge, local client relationships and place closeness to customers at risk. The consequence being that if you wait long

enough there will be a call to return to devolved decision-making to counterbalance the downside of central control. Wait for another few years and the pendulum will swing right back. Barry's truly insightful thinking and methodology proposes designing systems that will hold on to the benefits of both poles without dipping down into the weaknesses of both sides.

In this book, I make a slightly less sophisticated point. My view is that we have developed this form of Binary Thinking into a habit so that it is seen as normal and, as such, it is left unchecked. We take for granted the notion that it is sensible to formulate problems or possibilities into seemingly mutually exclusive camps. At a more fundamental level, we also take it for granted that if we have gone through the steps of identifying two distinct and different options to help meet our challenges, we have done the thinking needed to solve our problems. What we have actually done is sleepwalked our way into working with a reduced range of possibilities and conned ourselves into thinking that a combination of both, even if they are genuinely our best option, is not possible.

The next time you are in a brainstorming session or are in a group called upon to solve problems, listen to the way Binary Thinking is used. Each time you hear an either/or option being presented, ask yourself whether in fact the two options might be combined. Ask yourself whether enough thinking has been done to weed out the abundance of solutions to the problem. Before you put this book down, think about under what circumstances it might be possible to achieve both of the binary options in all the examples in Table 1.3.

Equity Thinking

Closely related to the families of deficit and rational thinking is the final category of Equity Thinking; an incredibly dominant habit of ours that refers to the principle of fairness as a quiet but powerful engine in our thinking processes. Such is the strength of this human predilection that if you search on the Internet to find references to the following keyword searches you get a sense of how important fairness and equity are in our thinking²:

fair ³	85.5 million hits
equality	20.4 million hits
unfair	13.6 million hits
equity ⁴	11.8 million hits

fairness 11.3 million hits
 inequality 8.5 million hits
 accountancy 4.1 million hits
 (for comparative purposes)

When we think about equity and fairness we are reminded of how tightly tied-in these principles are to our notions of civilized society. From a philosophical and from a moral perspective, it is difficult to think of fairness as being anything other than ‘right’. Our language, our legal system, our social system, even our attitude to conflict sees a playing out of Equity Thinking. Just consider some of the words and phrases commonly found in our vocabulary – equality of opportunity, meritocracy, gender equality, fair trade, copyright fair use, equal pay, ‘a level playing field’, fairness doctrine, ‘true and fair financial accounts’, ‘fair share’, ‘fair dues’, social justice, racial equality, ‘equality of access’, ‘unfair discrimination’, ‘inequalities in health care’, ‘all’s fair in love and war’, equal rights, ‘all men are created equal’, ‘all animals are equal’, and equal treatment.

In practice, Equity Thinking involves making direct comparisons between two or more like-events or groups with the expectation that there should be an equal distribution of a particular variable such as legal rights, opportunity, funds, health, power, voice, access, or behavior. It is in the application of this principle and the moral force that it carries that almost every social movement in the last century – from voting rights for women to gay rights – has made headway. Invoking the principle of fairness coupled with tireless campaigning and legislative changes, and more often than not, direct action, has made possible all that we now accept and hold as ‘right’.

To illustrate the power of Equity Thinking in a slightly different way, ask yourself the question: what case might have been put to make these advances if the principle of fairness had not existed? How much more difficult would the struggle of the suffragettes have been if they could not have pointed to the inequality between men and women on voting rights? How much more difficult would it have been to have affected changes to the employment rights of ethnic minorities across North America and Europe if differential treatment between white and non-white employees was deemed acceptable? Within the healthcare system, what case would have been put to prevent wealthier patients being treated more quickly than poorer patients if not the principle of equity?

As with all our other thinking habits, Equity Thinking is superb and without it we would be far less able to tackle the challenges we

face. As a habit though, as with all habits, we follow the equity path unthinkingly – equating fair thinking with optimal thinking; automatically focusing on what seems fair instead of fully understanding what works. As participants and observers to Equity Thinking we also complicitly reinforce the ‘rightness’ of looking for opportunities to even things up; using our eye for deficiencies to agree that something seems unbalanced or out of place.

Just the other day, I was sitting in a restaurant and overheard a bizarre conversation between a young couple who were whispering loudly to one another. The couple were desperate not to make a scene but even more determined to get their seemingly conflicting views across. Initially, I imagined that it was quite serious until I heard a few words drifting across to, by now, my highly attuned ears. Curiously it transpired that they were arguing about the food they had ordered. They had both ordered foie gras and chicken terrine as a starter and were struck by how different the proportion of foie gras to chicken appeared to be in each of their terrines. The woman had less foie gras than the man. Neither had yet tasted the starter but the scene was nevertheless well underway. As the somewhat strange story unfolded, it became clear that this wasn’t the first time that the woman had been given less of what she had most liked about her order in a restaurant. ‘It’s not fair. This always happens to me’, the whispering complaint drifted across the room. ‘Well why don’t you have mine then?’ he replied, attempting to quietly but firmly switch plates. ‘That wouldn’t be fair on you either’, she replied switching them back just as quickly. It was a fairness stalemate. They sat staring at each other as the whispering-shouting ceased.

For me, it was a wonderful illustration of two serious questions about Equity Thinking. Firstly, whose perspective do you consider the issue of fairness? Secondly, is fairness always a useful principle to apply? In the case of the restaurant inequity neither diner knew whether their starter tasted better with a greater or lesser proportion of foie gras. The female diner might ironically have benefited more from an inequitable distribution.

An organizational illustration of both these issues is when I worked in organization where, among other things, I had overall responsibility for approximately 200 accountancy trainees that would work and train with the organization. They would each participate in a 40-month training program that would eventually lead them to Chartered Accountancy status with strong career prospects for the rest of their lives. It was a tough qualification and was fairly unrelenting in the frequency of exams and assessments. The organization had clearly laid down policy on the various exam performances that students had

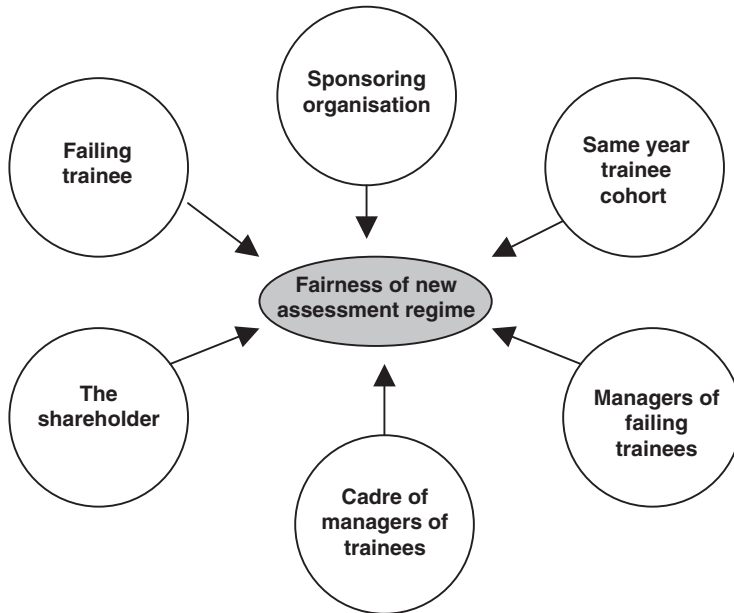
to attain in order to progress to each stage and to stay in the employ of the organization. Over the years, we had built data on the extent to which relatively poorer exam performances at early stages in the training program were predictive of final stage failure rates. After evaluating the position and reflecting on our existing policy and consulting too with other companies who trained accountants, we took the decision to raise the organizational pass rate by a few but significant notches for subsequent intakes of graduates.

This met with a barrage of complaints from trainees, their managers, and their ‘counseling directors’ who forcibly challenged the decision on the grounds that it was inequitable to expect trainees studying only a year or more apart to be subject to different assessment regimes. Many managers and counseling directors had too passed through the system some years before and could sympathize with the stringency of the new arrangements. Inevitably, as students began to filter through the new regime, some students fell short by a couple of marks which, under the old policy, would have been sufficient for them to pass through the gateway to the next stage. In these cases, however, contracts were required to be terminated and again trainees, managers, and counseling directors all put the case that it was an unfair system. Not only, though, were trainees and their supporters as one in the view that the system was unfair, but their fellow students who had passed under the new regime held the same line. At times, the organization had most of the 200 trainees disgruntled and opposed to the arrangement. Worst still, in a very buoyant marketplace where more than two-thirds of trainees would leave the organization within two years of qualification, the level of dissatisfaction borne from this sense of inequity threatened to strip the organization of almost all its qualifying trainees, which had represented a heavy financial investment. It was a serious problem.

On the question, though, of ‘fair to whom?’ there are a great many ways of seeing this situation and Table 1.4 points to some of the main perspectives from which this question might be answered.

In the example given, the perspective that came to the fore was that of the trainee and, in particular, those trainees that were subject to a different exam policy from previous years. From this viewpoint, it is entirely understandable that the new arrangements could be understood as unfair, particularly as students met socially and worked alongside trainees from different years who were subject to lower standards of assessment. However, if we shift our attention to students only within each year, the picture looks more equitable. Every student, for

Table 1.4 The equity principle as viewed from different perspectives



example in a single year's intake, would join the organization on an explicit understanding of the performance standards required and would sign up to the 40-month contract on that basis.

From the perspective of the organization, it needs to protect its investment and, if empirical research shows that those trainees who initially 'squeeze through' against a weaker standard run a higher risk of failing two or three years down the line, then to be fair to the sponsoring organization, it is justified in raising the bar. Furthermore, if the organization makes the standard an explicit term of the contract at the outset, then it would be unfair of the employee to accuse the organization of operating an unfair system.

Managers of failing trainees may view the system as unfair because they will, at least temporarily, lose staff as their contracts are terminated. At least in the short-term, such managers can feel as much a victim of the new system as the trainees. However, there is no doubt that it is only through chance that a manager may have a failed trainee working for them and because the distribution of trainees is random (within the organization illustrated), the system cannot be held to be unfair even if, for example, the same manager were to year after year receive trainees that failed. That would just be bad luck not inequitable.

Moving clockwise around the circle in Table 1.4, it is clear that fairness, viewed from different perspectives, can cause a 180-degree shift in thinking and in the prevailing view. Taking the shareholder as our last illustration, the first point that needs to be made is that, as the ultimate sponsor of this organization's services, this is a viewpoint that can't afford to be ignored or underemphasized. It is in the shareholders' interest that resources should be invested well, and it is only fair to the shareholder that judgments on the way their money is spent is based on sound investment decisions. If every year, or even every six months, the exam pass level rate were to change perhaps to keep pace with changing standards or even stronger predictive data, then, from the shareholders' perspective, this too would be fair because it would represent an equitable return on the investment made.

This brings me to my second point about Equity Thinking which is that so often it is used out of place – not even consciously; maybe even compulsively at times. In the example above, the concept of equity is important but it should be way down the list in considering how best to employ employees with the skills needed to best serve customers. That is where the focus of thinking should be.

Keep your ears pricked for Equity Thinking. Try to see how early on in a conversation you can detect someone forming comparisons in order to find inconsistencies, and ultimately to conclude that something is unfair. If you wish to be devilish, ask them why fairness is important. Ask them too whether there are other legitimate comparisons that haven't been made and why this is so.

A bleak summary

At this point, I would like to provide a brief summary of the shortcomings of the thinking habits we use. I am aware in doing this that this is a deficit-focused approach, but I am using this strategy for two reasons. Firstly, because our thinking styles are well used thinking habits, we automatically assume they are a sensible way to think, and I want to remind you why this is not always the case. In doing so, I hope to open up some other ways of thinking that we might incorporate within our repertoire. These are explored later. Secondly, in the remainder of this and the next chapter, I want to move on to a more sociological perspective which requires us to think about both the processes through which habits are formed, and the impact this