

# PRESENCE OF MIND



Use your thinking to your advantage. Understanding the mechanics that underlie human thought gives us a better chance to produce the results we desire and to avoid those we do not.

It is 8:00 a.m. I am walking into my client's office. We have been consulting with this particular client for over six months. The account is profitable, and the client is happy. I am the Client Partner, and I feel great today. As I walk in, a colleague informs me that our client sent out an RFP to five other consulting firms to bid on a piece of work that falls within our program.

It is now 8:02, and I am starting to get anxious. I thought my client and I had a good relationship and that we were honest with each other. By 8:06, I have a lump in my throat. I am convinced that we are failing and that I do not have a partnership with my client. By 8:10, I doubt my value as a consultant; I know I will not make it as a partner this year, and I am thinking of resigning from the account. It is now 8:14, and I am drafting my resignation speech in my head. At 8:15, I change my mind: I will get on my team's case, avoid my client at all costs for now and spend the rest of my day designing an approach on how to convince my client that we are best consulting firm for them. I am now nauseous - it is 8:20 a.m.

What is happening here?

What occurred between 8:02 and 8:20? After all, the only data I received was a brief comment from one of my colleagues on his way to his first meeting. What happened is that my 'thinking' got the best of me. This is a case of thinking gone awry.

Thinking is at the core of the human experience. Our studies show that thinking leads to feelings, feelings lead to behaviors, and behaviors impact results. The truism is that "our thinking impacts our results." Understanding the mechanics underlying our thinking gives us a better chance to produce the results we desire and to avoid those we do not.

From the time we are born, we build a body of knowledge acquired through the events and experiences of our lives. This knowledge, in the form of beliefs, becomes who we think we are and forms the basis of our reality. Thinking is basically using our beliefs to identify, interpret, and confirm what is happening to us internally and externally at any given moment.

Thinking is good, and it is powerful. Our neural pathways store a colossal amount of data that we have converted to beliefs so that we can make sense of our world. The alphabet, basic math, how to read and write, and special skills are all stored – and we don't have to relearn them every day! We are able to access what we believe millions of times a day to perform simple and very complex activities. This is what separates us from most of the other species on the planet. This is what we call our intelligence.

It was 3:00 p.m. on a Tuesday afternoon in New York City. I was picking up my daughter, Chloé, after school. She was waiting behind the front doors and had a very long face. My mind was very busy as this was a workday, and I needed to get home quickly to get on a conference call. I opened the doors to the school, quickly kissed her hello and took her by the hand so that we could grab a taxi. She resisted, dragged her feet and let her bag fall off her shoulder. I turned around and looked down at her and said, "Let's go home." This charade lasted several minutes. I knew what she was doing: she was purposefully being difficult and trying to slow down my pace. After all, she was six, and this is what six-year-olds do. I grew increasingly upset. Finally, I decided what to do. I was going to drag her into a taxi and give her a time out. Isn't this what daddies are supposed to do?

And then, something hit me! I got an insight. I thought to ask her why she was doing this. So I knelt down and asked, "Chloé what is going on?" She looked at me a little surprised and asked, "Do you want to talk?" Taken aback, I responded, "Yes." With a determined chin, she started, "Daddy you were late! You made me wait here. And you always said to me when you are late you always have to say you are sorry, and you didn't say, I'm sorry." Feeling stunned and embarrassed, I looked into her little brown eyes. I was 15 minutes late. After a few seconds, I said, "Thank you Chloé. I was late, and I am very sorry." She smiled victoriously and hugged me. I noticed how touched I was by my little girl. The afternoon went great.

In this case, my thinking almost got the best of me, but I did something different. Instead of continuing down a path based on what I believed about six-year-olds and about Chloé, I stopped and inquired for a different possibility. This inquiry yielded a much different result in comparison to what would have occurred had I not done so. This new result was clearly more favorable and occurred once I had the presence of mind to stop and inquire.

How many times a day do we assess, interpret, evaluate, and make judgments based on our beliefs? How often do we feel as though it is unnecessary and a waste of time to stop, inquire, and reflect on what is going on? How often do we feel like we need to be right, state our opinions, and know the answer? How often do we act and do, versus ask and listen? How often do we not trust others or ourselves and keep hammering away to find the 'real' truth?

And as a result, how many misinterpretations, missed opportunities and hasty judgments occur? How often do we stress out over nothing, perceive an enemy where there isn't one, and distance an ally for the wrong reasons? How often do we focus on the wrong piece of work, make the wrong decision, and obsess over events we 'assume' are going on? How often do we resist change? And how often are we unable to access our creativity and that of others?

The answer to these questions is clear. And this answer points to why so many of us struggle in our work and in our organizations, why so many leaders aren't really leading, why so many managers are over-controlling, why so many teams break down, why so many change efforts fail, and why so many employees are dissatisfied.

The issue is that in the very same neural pathways in which are stored constructive, positive, and helpful beliefs are found negative, questionable, and inaccurate beliefs. These beliefs have a familiar sound: "People from a certain country are not trustworthy," "Finance people without an MBA are not as smart," "People who dress like that are not creative," "Meetings are always a waste of time," "Marketing folks

don't really work," "Things will never change around here," "I will never make it to that position," "Such and such is a jerk," "I will never be rich," and so on.

The challenge we face is that we constantly use all of our beliefs - the good and the ugly - to make sense what is happening to us. And we are not truly aware of which one is which at any one given moment. We are forever interpreting our environment: "This person looked away during the meeting, she is not interested in my work," "This person took notes, he likes my work." Most of the time, we do not know what the truth is. And yet we still make decisions and take actions.

The question is not whether to think or not think; the question is how do we use our thinking to our advantage and not our detriment. We are the thinkers. We control our thinking. This is important. Once we accept and understand this, we can begin to see our thinking in action and understand the consequences of our thoughts. We can begin to see how we use our beliefs to identify, interpret, and confirm what is happening to us. We can differentiate between those beliefs that help us and those that do not.

But how can we see our thinking in action? How do we see how we use our beliefs? What will offer us this opportunity? The short answer for now is: Inquiry and Reflection. These two offer us this opportunity.

When we inquire (to ourselves and others), we stop being right and having to know the answer. We become curious and open to what else is available. We explore, we listen and we learn – about others and about ourselves.

When we reflect, we let our neural pathways work more broadly; we pick up forgotten data; we make new connections; we produce insights; we see more clearly, and finally we understand.

Through inquiry and reflection, we tap into the collective intelligence and a deeper personal wisdom. We begin to see the process in action. When inquiry and reflection are combined with telling and doing, the results can be phenomenal: better communication, more powerful relationships, greater well-being, greater creativity, less resistance to change, and, ultimately, better business performance.

At 8:20 a.m., I closed my eyes. I took a deep breath and asked myself what else could be possible here. Perhaps I shouldn't send my resignation letter without finding out a few more details of what actually occurred. And perhaps I shouldn't hold a meeting with my team to berate them and tell them they needed to stay more on top of our client's business. Perhaps, I should meet with the client and have a real and open discussion about what I heard. This is exactly what I did.

In my discussion with the client, I learned that they had a previous relationship with another consulting company and did have one RFP out to them for a very specific task that we were not able to do. Furthermore, my client had political pressure to use this other company. In fact, my client was wondering how to approach me with this information because he did value our relationship, and it was critical to the outcome of the engagement that our firm work with this other consulting company. My client appreciated my candor and was pleased that I valued our relationship enough to talk to him.

They hired the other company for a shortened version of the task. We worked with the results. We stayed another nine months. The account ended successfully.

For more information email [Partners@AccompliGroup.com](mailto:Partners@AccompliGroup.com)