

# HOW SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE THINK

Pocket Guide to Thinking  
*11 Types of Thinking That Will Change Your Life*

*John C. Maxwell*

# Pocket Guide to Thinking

*11 Types of Thinking That Will Change Your Life*

1. Big-Picture Thinking
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# Big-Picture Thinking

## *Acquire the Wisdom of Big-Picture Thinking*

### **What is it?**

Big-Picture Thinking is the ability to see what others see, what they're missing, and how to navigate uncharted territory.

### **How does it work?**

Big-Picture Thinking means taking stock of the bigger view in order to see potential obstacles and define possible outcomes. It's the ability to practice what some experts call "scenario planning" – stepping back and taking in a global perspective, a discipline that industry leaders of all types use to navigate change and thrive with future markets.

### **Big-Picture Thinking in action:**

A recent example of scenario planning comes from the folks at Apple. As they looked at the market feedback on their Apple Watch to learn how fans of the device were using it, they found a key area where they could make a helpful adjustment.

Programmers changed the watch's popular Health app to reflect patient record-keeping within the healthcare industry. The shift in tracking made their app more useful and empowered consumers with information when walking into a doctor's office.

By checking the Health app, users were able to answer common questions asked by physicians quickly and easily. Not only did the information make patient visits faster and more effective, it also increased the confidence and comfort of watch users.

### **Do it now:**

Big-Picture Thinking asks questions that look at the past, present, and future. Here are five to consider from the work of Dr. Freek Vermeulen<sup>1</sup>, professor of strategy at London Business School.

These five questions are a great starting place for a big-picture conversation with your team:

1. What doesn't fit that we're spending time and energy on?
2. What would someone outside of my challenge do if they were in charge?
3. Is the foundation of my business consistent with the strategy I'm implementing?
4. Do I fully understand why we do it *that way*?
5. What might be the long-term consequences?

### **Wise words on Big-Picture Thinking:**

"Our nation needs bridges, and bridges are built by those who look to the future and dedicate themselves to helping others. I don't know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future: It is you." – Sandra Day O'Connor

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<sup>1</sup> <https://hbr.org/2015/09/5-strategy-questions-every-leader-should-make-time-for>

### **What is it?**

Creative Thinking is the ability to escape your “boxed-in” thinking and reimagine possible solutions.

### **How does it work?**

Creative Thinking increases the number and quality of solutions on the table.

Have you ever used TABASCO® Original Red Pepper Sauce? You know, the iconic small bottle with the green cap? Odds are, you’ve used it once or twice, or maybe it’s sitting in your kitchen right now.

Did you know that TABASCO® has been producing this famous red pepper flavor for over 100 years? Back in 1868 Edmund McIlhenny of Avery Island, Louisiana, was fed up with the bland diet at the time and out of pure necessity he came up with the recipe for TABASCO® Original Red Pepper Sauce to add some flavor and excitement to his food.

For 125 years TABASCO® produced one flavor of the sauce.

Why is this important?

Well, in 1993 something happened at TABASCO® that hadn’t happened in over a century. In 1993 they introduced the Green Pepper Sauce, and it was a huge success. So much so that if you fast forward to today, TABASCO® has eight flavors. So instead of just one flavor, the brand has evolved, “From mild to wild, there’s something for everyone.”



But what if, in 1993, the folks at TABASCO® had said “no” to trying something new? What if instead, the decision-makers responded with, “We’ve always done it this way.” Why mess with a good thing?”

Trying something new requires “out of the box” thinking. It requires us to choose possibility over fear and to think creatively. It also can be the difference between staying stuck in the past and moving into the future.

Now it’s your turn. What possibilities are waiting for you? Where can you start applying “out of the box” thinking?

# Creative Thinking

## Discovering the Joy of Creative Thinking

### ***Creative Thinking in action:***

Delta Airlines was in bad shape in 2004. They'd filed for chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. Fast forward to today in 2019, Delta is a leading airline with an incredibly healthy culture and equally healthy profits.

How did they turn it around?

Creative Thinking! Executives at Delta, including CEO Ed Bastian, started making changes to the structure of the business that completely changed the way employees, shareholders, customers, and the general public saw their business.<sup>2</sup>

- They provided an employee profit-sharing program that gives 10% of company profits to employees (before taxes).
- They brought their booking services in-house (the only U.S. airline to do so) in order to manage their customer data.
- They expanded their reach by partnering with international carriers like KLM and Aero México.

### ***Do it now:***

Stop asking "Can I?" and start asking "How can I?" If a bankrupt airline turned its entire business around by introducing Creative Thinking, what could it do for you?

### ***Wise words on Creative Thinking:***

"All meaningful and lasting change starts first in your imagination and then works its way out. Imagination is more important than knowledge." – Albert Einstein

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<sup>2</sup> <https://hbr.org/2014/12/deltas-ceo-on-using-innovative-thinking-to-revive-a-bankrupt-airline>

# Realistic Thinking

## Recognize the Importance of Realistic Thinking

### **What is it?**

Realistic Thinking is the ability to recognize the facts and build certainty around them. It is the process by which you take your dream from *wish to will*.

### **How does it work?**

Realistic Thinking is fuel for driving results. Based on the work of a Wharton and Columbia business school professor<sup>3</sup>, these two actions can help:

1. **Acknowledge the gap** between where you are today and where you want to be in the future. Map your growth and the narrowing of the gap on a timeline to determine what is realistic.
2. **Beware of linear thinking.** When we're talking about personal development, you can't expect to see constant, uphill growth day after day, year over year. It's a journey with a varying pace. That doesn't mean you don't challenge yourself. It means you remember to be patient when a season of growth requires more time or effort than you'd originally thought.

### **Realistic Thinking in action:**

Campbell Soup Company was steadily declining. Their headquarters was situated in Camden, New Jersey, one of the poorest and most crime-ridden cities in the United States. While other companies thought it smart to move out and abandon ship, Campbell's faced the facts and chose to get deeply involved in improving the well-being of the children in Camden.

*As a food company, working hand-in-hand with a cadre of strategic local and national partners, we centered our efforts on health and nutrition. The project, still in its infancy, is focused on cutting the BMI (Body Mass Index) of Camden's 23,000 children in half over the next decade. It includes bringing nutritionists into schools and having Campbell's chefs help parents think about ways to serve healthy food at home... Campbell is also sponsoring activities for youth to increase physical fitness in schools and to help them remain active and occupied when school is not in session. And the company is developing the areas all around its world headquarters – leveling run-down buildings to attract commerce. – Douglas R. Conant, former CEO Campbell Soup Company<sup>4</sup>*

It's an ambitious community agenda that has advanced Campbell's corporate agenda by focusing on the real challenges of food and nutrition in the community. The result will transform their brand and reinvigorate their mission.

### **Do it now:**

Require projections to be backed up with ownership. This will help you develop accountability with the outcomes you aim for and determine how realistic they are.

### **Wise words on Realistic Thinking:**

“Idealism increases in direct proportion to one's distance from the problem.” – John Galsworthy

<sup>3</sup> <https://hbr.org/2017/07/how-to-set-more-realistic-growth-targets?autocomplete=true>

<sup>4</sup> <https://hbr.org/2011/11/the-flywheel-effect-what-reall?autocomplete=true>

# Strategic Thinking

## *Releasing the Power of Strategic Thinking*

### **What is it?**

Strategic Thinking is taking control of tomorrow by thinking about it today. Strategic people see the world as a web of interconnected ideas, and they find opportunities to advance their ideas by making connections early and often.

### **How does it work?**

Strategic Thinking contains five elements:

1. Thinking consistently
2. Thinking within context
3. Thinking on the front end
4. Thinking with others in mind
5. Thinking with a return in mind

### **Strategic Thinking in action:**

Twenty-three movies. \$18.5 billion dollars at the box office. One simple strategy: Make movies that told distinct stories yet connected to tell one BIG story. If you boiled down the box office titan that is Marvel Studios, you'd find that strategy emanating from the mind of studio head Kevin Feige.

The process began in 2005 when Marvel decided to take their future in film into their own hands and launch Marvel Studios. Feige was tapped to be the creative and strategic head of the nascent film company, and he set out to secure funding with a sketched-out 10-year plan.

“We said, ‘We want to make a great Iron Man movie. We want to make a great Thor movie. We want to make a great Cap movie,’” Feige told website Mashable in 2015. “I was hoping *Iron Man* would make enough money that we could make another movie. We were a new studio. If it didn’t work, that would’ve been it.”<sup>5</sup>

The studio secured a \$525 million loan from Merrill Lynch by using the rights to properties such as Black Panther and Doctor Strange as collateral. Jon Favreau, the director of *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 2*, reveals that working on that first film was a stressful experience.

“We were on very shaky ground,” recalls Favreau. “That first film could not have felt smaller or more handmade. I was constantly being reminded that if we screwed up and we couldn’t pay back the loan, the bank was going to take all of the catalog.”<sup>6</sup>

Almost two decades later, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe (or MCU for short) is still humming, and Feige keeps the strategy flowing, even if only loosely.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://mashable.com/2017/07/05/kevin-feige-marvel-cinematic-universe-interview/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://variety.com/2019/film/features/kevin-feige-avengers-endgame-marvel-studios-1203188721/>

# Strategic Thinking

## *Releasing the Power of Strategic Thinking*

“We usually work with a specific five-year plan at any given point but often have a general plan that extends much, much further,” Feige said in May 2019.<sup>7</sup>

Then in July, he proved his point by unveiling the extensive list of film and streaming projects that the studio would produce over the next three years at San Diego’s famous Comic-Con event.<sup>8</sup>

Whether you’re Marvel or a mom-and-pop, in order to think strategically, you must ask questions that:

1. Unlock and open doors that otherwise would remain closed.
2. Set you and others up for success.
3. Are a result of curiosity.

Strategic questions cause us to *think things through* and then *follow things through*. Try the questions below to kick-start your Strategic Thinking.

**Do it now:**

Take time to answer the following to elevate your Strategic Thinking:

1. What are our measurable wins?
2. How are we doing now?
3. What needs to get better?

**Wise words on Strategic Thinking:**

“My greatest strength as a consultant is to be ignorant and ask a few questions.” – Peter Drucker

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<sup>7</sup> <https://irmonline.com/news/kevin-feige-talks-how-far-in-advance-they-plan-the-mcu/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://ew.com/comic-con/2019/07/20/marvel-comic-con-panel-everything-we-learned/>

# Possibility Thinking

## *Feel the Energy of Possibility Thinking*

### **What is it?**

Possibility Thinking is the ability to see solutions in seemingly impossible circumstances. It's the lens you look through to take a positive stance in the midst of immanent failure and see opportunity.

### **How does it work?**

Possibility Thinking starts with developing a positive life stance. When your belief and approach to your everyday life is negative, it's nearly impossible to see potential in people, circumstances or challenges. Developing a positive life stance is an on-going practice. Here is John Maxwell's mantra for remembering the power of a positive life stance:

1. Life is filled with good and bad.
2. Some of the good and bad I can't control... it's life.
3. Some of the good and bad will find me.
4. If I have a positive life stance, the good and bad will become better.
5. If I have a negative life stance, the good and bad will become worse.
6. Therefore, I choose a positive life stance.

### **Possibility Thinking in action:**

One Michelin-star chef and 3.6 million meals served.

Just four days after the devastation of Puerto Rico by Hurricane Maria in 2017, world-renowned chef Jose Andres boarded a plane and headed to Puerto Rico. For Andres, the endeavor started as a short trip to set up some mobile kitchens around the country and help feed people until the government could establish something more sustainable. It turned out, this process would take much longer than Andres thought.

What began as a problem for Andres and his organization, World Central Kitchen, became an opportunity to get creative.

"At the end of the day, what I try to do with every problem, we try to transform it into an opportunity," Andres said. "And that's what, in a very simple way, got us going."

Now, nearly two years later, Andres and World Central Kitchen have served over 3.6 million meals to Puerto Ricans and have empowered the local economy by sourcing their supplies from the island.

In the midst of difficult bureaucratic circumstances, Andres found a way to reach his intended goal – to feed the people of Puerto Rico and help revitalize a devastated country.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.marketplace.org/2018/09/13/how-jose-andres-fed-island/>

# Possibility Thinking

## *Feel the Energy of Possibility Thinking*

***Do it now:***

Memorize the positive life stance mantra above or develop your own to begin shifting your thinking to see more and bigger possibilities.

***Wise words on Possibility Thinking:***

“Man often becomes what he believes himself to be. If I keep on saying to myself that I cannot do a certain thing, it is possible that I may end by really becoming incapable of doing it. On the contrary, if I have the belief that I can do it, I shall surely acquire the capacity to do it, even if I may not have it at the beginning.”

– Mahatma Gandhi

# Reflective Thinking

## *Embrace the Lessons of Reflective Thinking*

### **What is it?**

Reflective Thinking is the consistent art of evaluating experience to repeat successes and avoid repeating failures.

### **How does it work?**

Consistently taking time daily, weekly, and annually to evaluate experiences and ask:

- What do I feel?
- What do I think?
- What do I know?

### **Reflective Thinking in action:**

In his research with top brands like Verizon and Xerox, management consultant Daniel Patrick Forrester discovered some profound and concerning data about the hard cost and mental cost leaders pay when they don't make Reflective Thinking part of their regular routine. He found that the average leader spends only 5% of her day reflecting.

- 28% — Interruptions (non-urgent or important items, email messages, and the time it takes to get back on task)
- 25% — Productive content creation (including writing email messages)
- 20% — Meetings (in person, by phone, by video, and online)
- 15% — Searching through content, like the Web, digital communications, and paperwork
- 5% — Reflecting

According to Forrester, “650 billion dollars is lost each year because we don't give ourselves time for reflection, and this stems from our aversion to being alone with our thoughts. We need to take back control by taking time for personal and professional reflection.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Do it now:**

Make time at the end of every day for one week to answer these questions:

- What do I feel?
- What do I think?
- What do I know?

### **Wise words on Reflective Thinking:**

“No one can produce great things who is not thoroughly sincere in dealing with himself.”

– James Russell Lowell

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.skipprichard.com/consider-harness-the-power-of-reflective-thinking/>

# Popular Thinking

## *Question the Acceptance of Popular Thinking*

### **What is it?**

Popular Thinking is the acceptance of common “wisdom” without challenging assumptions or asking questions. Uncommon Thinking is the antidote to Popular Thinking.

### **How does it work?**

Uncommon Thinking requires asking questions, challenging norms, and being vigilant to the thoughts and beliefs you accept as true. It also requires a strong inner circle of trusted peers to provide feedback. Most importantly, Uncommon Thinking requires becoming comfortable with not having all the answers.

Popular Thinking Traps:

1. “We’ve never done it this way before.”
2. “There is only one way to do it.”
3. “Average is good enough.”
4. “Wealth is bad.”
5. “I’m entitled to success.”

To avoid Popular Thinking traps, you must...

1. Become comfortable with being uncomfortable.
2. Seek out different voices.
3. Look at old things in new ways.

### **Uncommon Thinking in action:**

In the 1970’s, Yale psychologist Irving Janis offered a theory on why smart groups of people can sometimes make radically stupid decisions with almost no awareness of how far off base their thinking has become. He called this theory “groupthink.”

Janis came up with the idea of groupthink after reading about the Bay of Pigs fiasco during John F. Kennedy’s presidency. He found himself suggesting that what had happened in the White House might be similar to what happened among ordinary citizens when operating in groups: They often developed a “pattern of concurrence-seeking . . . when a ‘we’ feeling of solidarity is running high.”

As he continued his study, he found similar patterns of thinking in several military and political decisions gone awry, such as the lack of protection over Pearl Harbor and the escalation of the Vietnam War.

Participants in those critical decisions, Janis found, failed to consider the full range of alternatives or consult experts who could offer different perspectives. They rejected outside information and opinion unless it supported their preferred policy.

Since Janis’ original discovery and naming of this phenomenon, “groupthink” has become a widely known and

## Popular Thinking

### *Question the Acceptance of Popular Thinking*

understood threat to thoughtful decision making in the military, within foreign relations, and in society at large.<sup>11</sup>

***Do it now:***

Make a list of the people who have the most influence over your thinking and decision making. Reflect on whether you feel they provide you with a differing voice that helps you avoid Popular Thinking.

***Wise words on Popular Thinking:***

“The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from the old ones.”

– John Maynard Keynes

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<sup>11</sup> <https://yalealumnimagazine.com/articles/1947-a-brief-history-of-groupthink>

# Shared Thinking

## *Encourage Participation in Shared Thinking*

### **What is it?**

Shared Thinking is the intentional act of partnering with other people to take your ideas from good to great.

### **How does it work?**

John Maxwell leverages Shared Thinking in a number of ways, but one of his most consistent practices is with his books. At the beginning stages of every book John writes, he assembles a team of people around a table, and he presents them with his thesis and rough chapter outline. Then, John turns the team loose to help him make the book better.

These people then spend hours kicking around the validity of John's thesis, the structure of his outline, potential titles, suggested changes, and anything else that will serve John's purpose of writing the best book he can possibly write.

At the end of their time together, John and his team have come up with dozens of new or interesting ideas, several refinements to existing ideas, and on many occasions some ideas that need to be completely discarded.

Why?

Because one person isn't as smart as many people. That's the value of Shared Thinking. It provides...

- Perspective – Others help you see what you can't see on your own.
- Understanding – Others help you discover someone else's experience.
- Teaching – Others help you lean into their expertise.

### **Shared Thinking in action:**

Psychological studies show that shared vision plays a major role in leadership effectiveness, engagement, and citizenship – and it has a physical effect on us as well. Shared Thinking invokes neural networks and hormonal systems that help us open up to new ideas and others' opinions.<sup>12</sup>

One study showed that members of a team were more engaged if they had a high degree of shared vision and thinking within the team. Another study demonstrated in healthcare facilities that physicians were more likely to be seen as effective leaders when they demonstrated a higher degree of shared vision and thinking in their relationships with the rest of the staff and facility administrators.

### **Do it now:**

Consider this statement and make it a priority to approach problem solving and thinking with this in mind: "Everyone can teach me something."

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<sup>12</sup> <https://hbr.org/2015/07/how-to-handle-rebellion-on-your-team>

# Shared Thinking

*Encourage Participation in Shared Thinking*

***Wise words on Shared Thinking:***

“One is too small a number to achieve significance. That is true in action and that is true in thinking.”

– John C. Maxwell

# Unselfish Thinking

## *Experience the Satisfaction of Unselfish Thinking*

### **What is it?**

Unselfish Thinking is the understanding that you cannot experience true significance without finding a way to give the value of your thoughts to others.

### **How does it work?**

Unselfish Thinking adds value, which means it's a mindset to do whatever you can for someone that they simply cannot do for themselves. This can look like a myriad of things because what you have to offer to others is unique to you.

### **Unselfish Thinking in action:**

In May of 2019, billionaire investor Robert F. Smith added value to a group of graduating college students that they never could have done for themselves. Smith gave the commencement address at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. As one of the richest black men in America, he served as a prime example of how education and work ethic help us succeed.

During the address, Smith surprised the graduating class and faculty by announcing that he intended to completely pay off the cumulative debt all 396 students, so they could begin their lives outside of college without the tremendous financial burden of educational loans.

There was no incentive for Smith to make this contribution. The act rose out of a sincere belief in the value of education and his unique ability to serve those young men in a way that almost no one else could. His only charge to those graduates was to look for their own way to pay it forward.

That is the power of Unselfish Thinking.<sup>13</sup>

### **Do it now:**

Look for one way to add value to one person every day.

### **Wise words on Unselfish Thinking:**

“At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has a cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.” – Albert Schweitzer

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/19/education/morehouse-college-robert-f-smith.html>

# Bottom-Line Thinking

## *Enjoy the Return of Bottom-Line Thinking*

### **What is it?**

Bottom-Line Thinking is an intense focus on driving results.

### **How does it work?**

Bottom-Line Thinking requires a dedication to targeted goals.

Your two most important bottom lines:

1. Add value to people.
2. Get a return on investment.

How do you add value to people and get a strong ROI?

1. Aim to be the best at one thing.
2. Build a team around being the best at that one thing.

### **Bottom-Line Thinking in action:**

From Gary Keller, *The One Thing: The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results*<sup>14</sup>

“Success demands singleness of purpose.

You need to be doing fewer things for more effect instead of doing more things with side effects.

It is those who concentrate on but one thing at a time who advance in this world.

Passion for something leads to disproportionate time practicing or working at it. That time spent eventually translates to skill, and when skill improves, results improve. Better results generally lead to more enjoyment, and more passion and more time is invested. It can be a virtuous cycle all the way to extraordinary results.

The ONE Thing shows up time and again in the lives of the successful because it’s a fundamental truth.

More than anything else, expertise tracks with hours invested.

The pursuit of mastery bears gifts.

When people look back on their lives, it is the things they have not done that generate the greatest regret...People’s actions may be troublesome initially; it is their inactions that plague them most with long-term feelings of regret.

# Bottom-Line Thinking

## *Enjoy the Return of Bottom-Line Thinking*

Make sure every day you do what matters most. When you know what matters most, everything makes sense. When you don't know what matters most, anything makes sense."<sup>14</sup>

**Do it now:**

Determine your two targets:

1. I can add value to people by...
2. I can get the greatest ROI by focusing on...

**Wise words on *Bottom-Line Thinking*:**

"Everyone can be good once, but only a few people can over-deliver consistently." – Mark Cole, CEO, John Maxwell Enterprises

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<sup>14</sup> Keller, Gary, and Jay Papasan. *The One Thing: The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results*. Bard Press, 2017.

# Focused Thinking

## *Unleash the Potential of Focused Thinking*

### **What is it?**

Focused Thinking is intensive concentration in order to gain clarity on the specifics of a challenge and reach the core of the problem.

### **How does it work?**

Create a focused environment:

1. Verbalize and Visualize—Say it and see it often.
2. Remove and Remain—Pull away and stay away.

### **Focused Thinking in action:**

When we fail to focus...

- Professionals lose 2.1 hours of productivity a day due to unimportant interruptions and distractions.
- \$588 billion of revenue is lost annually in productivity.
- Research by the author and speaker Daniel Pink also shows that time of day explains 20 percent of the variance on human performance on cognitive tasks. He writes that often we don't do the right tasks at the right time. He argues that the question of "when" is more important than questions of "what," "how," and "who."<sup>15</sup>
- Connie Gersick, an organizational behavior scholar, found that a team given 34 days to complete a project doesn't get started in earnest until day 17. Give a team 11 days, and they get going on day 6.

When we focus our thinking...

1. We tend to work on the right things.<sup>16</sup>
2. We create less stress for our brain as it maintains only one thinking pathway instead of several at one time.
3. We achieve presence of mind more often.<sup>17</sup>

### **Do it now:**

Consider this question for how you spend your focused time: *Where do I need to give 100%?*

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/timing-is-everything1/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.inc.com/kevin-daum/8-things-really-focused-people-do.html>

<sup>17</sup> <https://doist.com/blog/how-to-focus-better-at-work/>

# Focused Thinking

## *Unleash the Potential of Focused Thinking*

John Maxwell identifies three areas where focus is required:

1. In your strengths
2. With key people
3. The main event

***Wise words on Focused Thinking:***

“The immature mind hops from one thing to another; the mature mind seeks to follow through.”

– Harry A. Overstreet