

Welcome to
Thinking

Thinking: Dubrovnik, Croatia

In this episode of Leadership University we're going to explore:

- How the brain's "coding" establishes thinking
- Outcomes related to positive and negative thinking
- Identifying helpless thinking patterns within yourself and on your team
- Logging your thoughts to recognize automatic thinking patterns
- How negative influences impact decision making
- Routines and practices to encourage positive thinking

Timeline

Your work in this episode will take approximately 3 hours to complete. The videos and online work will take about 2.5 hours. You may be speaking to one team member for about 10 minutes. Toward the end of the episode, you will speak to your mentor for about 20 minutes.

Video: Intro

Thinking Is Where It All Begins

Thinking is the genesis of a leader's performance. Your thinking determines how you view yourself, your team and your potential for success. It drives a leader's behavior, both offensively and defensively.

Offensively, you want to be thinking, "How can we move the ball down the road?" Whether it's overcoming challenges or taking the next opportunity, your thinking frames all of those decisions and actions.

Defensively, much like the Walls of Dubrovnik, your thinking can help you to identify and stop outside threats to your achievements.

A glance back...

Look in the rearview mirror for a moment.

We all have patterns of thinking that can be negative, limiting, excusing, closed, or others. We can find ourselves thinking only about what is wrong around us instead of what we can do about it. Also, we can have ways of thinking that make success happen, such as optimistic perseverance, openness to not getting it right the first time, seeing possibilities instead of obstacles. As you look back, how has your thinking about yourself, your team and your potential for success, had an impact on your recent projects or goals over this past year?

Some samples include:

- I set a goal for our team, but I was too limited in my thinking and set it too low.
- I thought it would be easy, and when it got hard I began to think negatively
- I was not open enough to think Shaun had anything to offer

Share a few brief examples from your own life.

Successes

Consider a project or goal that was accomplished successfully. What were some aspects of your thinking that you believe contributed to that success?

...and Failures

On the other side, think about a recent time when you had a professional stumble or failed to reach a goal. How did your thinking contribute to that outcome?

Your Brain On Thinking

Your mindset, your way of thinking, has a direct impact on your productivity and outcomes. Let's take a look at how your brain creates and regulates those thoughts.

Video: Software

Software

Thinking works in our brains like a computer uses software. If a software is set up to create “A” or “B,” then “A” or “B” will happen. If that code is not written, you can click on an icon all you want, but nothing is going to happen.

That’s how thinking occurs in individuals and in groups. Whatever norms and behaviors get encoded and reinforced determine what happens next...indeed, what is possible. The prevailing thinking patterns of a team or an organization, its norms and belief systems, will define what it is and what it does. Thinking patterns also define what an organization doesn’t do or what it doesn’t allow for.

Repeating Patterns

Research by Dr. Fred Luskin has shown that 90% of people's thoughts today are the same thoughts that they had yesterday.

Sometimes the thoughts are about the same content. Sometimes the content may have changed, but the basic thought pattern remains. For example, perhaps a person is about to give a presentation, is worried, and is thinking "my boss and colleagues are not going to be impressed with this. I never do these well." The next day, he is going to call on a customer, and is thinking the same way: "this client is not going to buy in to what I want her to do." Even though the content has changed from the presentation to the client visit, the thinking itself is the same.

Auto-pilot

I want you to orient yourself to this idea:

Your brain produces thoughts, but that's not really thinking. Many of your thoughts are actually automatic.

Mind Reading

To illustrate this concept, I am going to ***READ YOUR MIND.***

Ready?

Grab a pen and paper if you wish.

Mind-Meld

Think of a number between 2 and 10.

Multiply that number by 9.

Add the two digits of the new number together.

Subtract 5 from that number.

Match the number to the corresponding letter of the alphabet. For example:
A=1, B=2 and so on.

Think of a country starting with your letter.

Go to the next letter in the alphabet, think of an animal starting with that letter.

Enter the country and animal here:

Answer

You are thinking of...an elephant from Denmark.

Did I read your mind?

No Magic Here

This basic parlor trick relies on two elements:

- 1) If you multiply any number by 9, the digits of each product added together always equals 9.
- 2) People's minds go to certain answers automatically.

(If you answered an Emu from Djibouti, you're likely thinking outside of the box.)

Automatic Thoughts Serve A Purpose

Why do we have automatic thoughts? Because we need them. Your brain uses them to makes maps of the world.

Driving to work this morning, you didn't need your GPS to get there, your brain knew how to do it. These mind maps not only direct your car, they also drive your performance.

But where do automatic thoughts come from?

Automatic Thoughts Are...

Taught: We are taught ways of thinking as we grown up. Some are correct, others are not. You've likely been told the expression, "It's lonely at the top." This is a false adage that people have learned. Great performers know, if they are lonely at the top, then they are not performing as they should be. Great performers surround themselves with great teams. Unfortunately, many false ideas get passed along unchecked.

Caught: When we're around people who think a certain way, that feeling gets internalized. Whether it's a parent, coach, friend or boss, the people around us shape our worldview both directly and indirectly.

Experienced: If we get burned by something, we learn to think negatively about it. Sometimes we have never questioned that thinking. We can think, "All finance companies are like this..." or "All sales are like that..." Our experience informs our thinking and sometimes we need to reframe our past in a different context to rewire our brain.

Think About Your Thinking Patterns

Let's look at some of your automatic thinking patterns.

Make a list of some of your automatic thoughts related to your role as a leader. An example would be, "it takes money to make money." That is an automatic thought that many people have that keeps them from stepping out and doing things. They could go raise the money if they didn't have any, for example.

Think about how they could impact you either positively or negatively. Were these thoughts taught, caught or created from personal experience?

Think About Your Thinking Patterns

Think of the people who have influenced the way you think. What voices or messages have they created in your mind? Are they positive? Negative?

Think About Your Thinking Patterns

What are some of the patterns you'd like to change?

Forward Thinking

In order to change thinking behaviors, we first have to recognize which patterns are positive and negative. Let's take a look at some of thinking patterns that effective leaders embrace and avoid.

Video: Optimism

Accentuate The Positive

This story I told you about the two groups of insurance salespeople is not hypothetical. It is based on a famous study conducted by Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and researcher Martin Seligman, as recounted in his book *Learned Optimism* (Knopf, 1991). We'll talk more about Seligman later.

This is the takeaway: Compare someone who “can’t” but thinks she can, to someone who “can” but thinks she can’t. The positive thinker wins every time.

It's Chemical

Neuroscience researchers have demonstrated that the anticipation of a good outcome produces the chemical dopamine. Among other attributes, dopamine helps the brain be awake and interested, characteristics that are very important to performance.

A positive and optimistic brain is a productive, energized brain ready to explore new ideas and to grapple with hard problems. That's exactly the kind of thinking leaders want to instill in their organizations. It's also why it's important to stamp out the negative.

Not A Just A “Yes-Person”

To clarify:

Positive thinking is NOT acting in a state of blissful ignorance toward problems.

Positive thinking is NOT saying “yes” to every idea that comes up.

Positive thinking IS being open to new ideas, not immediately squashing each new proposal.

Positive thinking IS believing you can accomplish your goals, and believing your team is capable of finding solutions to the challenges ahead.

Powerfully Positive

One of the main reasons organizations get stuck is that the leader has failed to spot negative thinking and effectively stop it from taking root.

You're responsible for making sure that optimism rules.

Remaining Positive

List a few ways you can encourage positive thinking behaviors in yourself.

Remaining Positive

What are some ways you can encourage positive thinking in your team?

Video: Helplessness

Learned Helplessness

Basically you can think of “learned helplessness” as a change in the software of the brain that occurs when one of the most fundamental laws of the universe is interrupted in our lives: the law of cause and effect.

Your Agency and Efficacy

As an infant, when you were hungry or in distress, you'd cry, and something good would happen: someone came with comfort, dryness, and food. Your brain learned very quickly that there is an order, or a set of rules, to the world, as in: cry and you get food. Or more generally: Act and good things happen.

Through millions of other moments, this pattern gets reinforced, and you develop a life in which you feel like you have “agency” and “efficacy.”

Constant Negativity

However, sometimes we find ourselves in a situation where we are continuously affected negatively, and we have absolutely no control over the things that are affecting us.

In that situation, like in a terrible economy, you find that no matter what you do, bad things are happening. Your clients still lose half their portfolio. Your customers are not buying your goods. When this happens in a chronic, ongoing situation, the “software” changes in the brain, and negativity seeps in. When you have negative expectations, a different chemical cocktail gets brewed in your brain. We get chemistry rooted in fear and stress, which shuts down our thinking, and we also can get "depressed thinking" as well.

The result is a fundamental change in outlook and how experiences get processed. When such a change occurs, your brain tells you to basically, “Do nothing.” Why? Because your brain thinks, “It won’t make any difference.” Your brain thinks that since you have no control over what is making you miserable, it might as well give up trying to have any control at all.

A Sad Experiment

The perniciousness of this kind of powerlessness first came to light in research that subjected dogs to a small electrical shock. In the first part of the experiment, the dogs received a shock but could do nothing to avoid the shock. The dogs were then exposed to another small electrical shock that they could easily escape.

Nevertheless, the dogs responded passively and gave up trying, even in the face of this new option. The first part of the experiment had taught them that they were helpless to act and to avoid suffering, and even when there was something they could do when they were given some control again, they had “learned” to accept their helplessness and do nothing.

3 Ps

In a learned-helplessness situation, the brain can make a big thinking shift in how it tells your entire system to respond. It just goes passive and shuts down. Creative thinking stops. The search for solutions stops. Problem solving stops. It's game over, or at least on pause.

That is learned helplessness in a nutshell: Your brain thinks, "Nothing I can do." But, as if it could get no worse, it does. Later research showed that without some kind of intervention or reframing, this kind of passivity will become even more pronounced and predictable in a thinking style. Seligman put this thinking style into three categories, the "three P's," which are:

Personal

Pervasive

Permanent

3 Ps Defined

Say a salesperson calls a client to offer a new product, and the client says that he is not interested. Someone with optimistic software would think, "I guess that client doesn't need it, or he has a brother-in-law he buys from," or some other explanation like that. Then the salesperson moves on and calls the next client, as if life is still normal and making calls leads to sales.

The person with learned helplessness interprets these events differently. He explains the event (the client saying no) in three ways:

1. First P: He sees it as "Personal."

He explains it in relation to himself, in a negative direction. "I am such a lousy salesperson. I have no credibility, no wonder they aren't buying anything from me." Bottom line: "It is because I am bad in some way."

2. Second P: He sees it as "Pervasive."

It goes from a single event to a pervasive reality. "It isn't just this client, all of my clients think that about me. In fact, it isn't just my clients. It is this whole business I am in, and the whole industry. It is not just this product, none of our products are that good." Bottom line: "Nothing is going well."

3. Third P: He sees it as "Permanent."

He thinks it will continue happening this way. "It is not going to change. We will never make our numbers again," he reasons. The thinking says the current negative event is not something that will eventually pass but has become the way it is, and the way it will be. Bottom line: "Nothing is going to be any different, so why try?"

The 3-Ps And Your Leadership

Take a personal audit and ask yourself: To what degree have you become a victim of helpless thinking?

Personal: “What ever made me think I could be a leader? The reason we are stuck is that I am not up to this task.”

Pervasive: “It seems like everything I am working on is failing. Nothing is going the way I need it to go.”

Permanent: “It is not going to change.”

Have you experienced any of the “three P’s?”

3 Ps and You

Which of the 3 P's (the negative experience feels personal, pervasive, and permanent) are hampering your thinking? What negative thoughts are they generating in your mind?

Great Leaders Think...

This kind of negative thinking is truly toxic to your work.

But don't worry, I'm going to show you how shift your thinking away from the thoughts that sabotage you and your team.

First, we are going to quickly review a few more ways of thinking that great leaders avoid or embrace.

Video: Right Size

Sometimes The Stakes Aren't That High

“If we don't make this one sale, or we don't get this one win, or we don't hire this one person, or that one person quits, then it's all over.”

I have sat in executive meetings, listening to people's doom and gloom and I've said to them, “What if that account dropped? What would you do?”

Then I would watch them get into another part of their brain and eventually they would say, “Well, we could do this or this...” They would suddenly realize that there are alternative outcomes. Not every change or failure is capable of torpedoing the business.

Right-Sizing And Big Decisions

People often struggle to right size their thinking about big decisions, such as firing somebody. They need to remove someone that's poisoning the culture, but they get caught up in how catastrophic the change might be. They just see the difficulties of the change and feel like they are not survivable.

Once they start to see how removing that person's negative energy would have a positive impact on their culture, AND they will be able to deal with the difficulties of the change, the process of hiring and training a new person may not seem so daunting. Then they feel empowered to make the change. Action has replaced helplessness.

What major decisions have you been putting off because fear of the unknown is holding you back?

Video: Generalize

Decide With Data

“We tried this one region and it didn’t work. So it’s not going to work anywhere.” With generalizing, you look at one thing and you think that’s the whole thing. It’s not.

People make rash, uneducated decisions when they over-generalize. Instead, look to your team’s data. What is there in black-and-white? Don’t allow the outliers to cloud your thinking.

What new or different data can you look to in order to better inform your decisions? Who can you talk to on your team to get even more/better data?

Video: Victim

You Are Not A Victim

When you are up against the wall, you always have choices. They may not be the choices you like, or the choices you can see right away. You have the choice of how you can respond. You have the choice of being active and aware.

When great leaders run into an obstacle, they never perceive themselves as powerless. They know that there are certain things they have power over and certain things they don't. They are very good at figuring that out. I remember in the crash of '08, whole industries felt victimized by the bad market. The great leaders said: "I can't control the market, but I can control X." With this mindset, some actually did better than they had done in the good years.

Video: Objective

Small Steps

You have to break down a problem into small, manageable steps. Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither were the Walls of Dubrovnik.

Think about a current roadblock in your work or a major project looming on the horizon. What small steps can you take right away to start chipping away at accomplishing your goal?

Video: Limits

Getting Your Team Involved

Great leaders also know that they can't do it alone. They have to rely on their team to do their jobs. Sometimes, the team can get stuck, and don't know where to go first. It is your job to guide them and move them along incrementally.

Ask your team what they can do to start making small steps towards a larger project or goal that you may have been avoiding. Can you delegate any of your responsibilities to them? What are the next small steps after that?

Test Your Limits

We limit ourselves on who we think is going to buy, or who we think we can hire, or who we think we can get to join us.

How do you find a limit? You push until you ultimately hit a wall. When you're flying a plane, there's a level around 13,000 feet where you will run out of oxygen. That's a real limit. Someone had to fly a plane very high to figure that out.

The reality is out there, but you won't know what that is until you go find it.

What are some limits that you have begun to assume, that you have never tested, and now are part of your thinking? How can you move beyond them?

Get Curious

You know what great performers do? They are curious. They ask questions. They read. They research. They talk to people throughout the industry.

Have you really knocked on the doors? Have you really talked to the person? You don't know the limits until you know. Get curious.

What are some things that you're curious about as a leader? What are some areas or projects where you have stopped being curious and settled for what you think presently?

Video: Consolidate

Thinking Is Everything

Reframing negative thinking is not just something out of some self-help book, encouraging you to, “think your way to a new life!” As Seligman and many other researchers have shown, it has real results in the real world, affecting the real bottom line. Your thinking impacts everything you do as a leader.

Rethinking Your Thinking

What great leaders do and what great performers do, is that they work on what they're thinking as much as they work on what they're touching. This is serious mental work that has to become part of a daily discipline. Let's get into it.

Video: Observe

Metacognition

Thinking about your thinking (Metacognition) is a powerful exercise. Once you get above your thinking, and start to become aware of how you're thinking, you can establish new patterns for change.

Ask Yourself

Reflect on your overall mindset. How does your thinking help you? Does it help you to obsess about doomsday? Does it push you to get on the phone? Do you withdraw? What's the fruit of this thinking? If I keep thinking this way, what is it costing me? What is it doing to the results that I care about?

Reflect on the questions above.

Write It Down

As I've said, most people go through the day with a running script in their head, unaware of how their thoughts are shaping their judgement.

In order to truly understand your thinking, you've got to start logging your thoughts.

Thinking Log

Tomorrow, I want you to make a running list of your thoughts during your work day. If it's helpful, set an alarm on your phone or watch for every hour. When the alarm sounds, write down what you were thinking about.

I also want you to take 10 minutes, focus on one element of your professional life and log some thoughts about that. For example, you can log your thoughts around: a project, a sale, a person, a product, the future, succeeding or failing, etc.

Your list may have lots of random things listed down, but that is OK. Go ahead and log your thought exactly as it passes through your mind. I'll be right here waiting when you're done.

Look Closely

Review your log and see what you learn. For example, when you thought of making a sales call, or a request from your boss, did you notice that negative predictions immediately came to mind? Begin to see your patterns, both in general and in specific areas.

Now look at your list again. Some of it might seem random. But see what you can learn. Also, these thoughts are producing emotions, either motivating, or demotivating. What did you learn about the emotional consequences of your thinking?

Maybe you wrote down, “I have to do the laundry tonight.” Peel back the layers there and you might realize you’re overwhelmed by chores at home and you need some help from your family.

Read deeply into your list. What emotions or situations are creating those thoughts?

Find The Patterns

Now go back to your patterns. Pay close attention to the negative ones and count the costs.

What do you observe about your thinking patterns? What have negative patterns cost you up to now? What will they cost you if you don't change them? What are the thinking patterns that you can identify that you need to change to reach your goals?

Video: Identify

Where Did These Thoughts Come From?

Look again at your thought log.

Which of your thought patterns are emerging from ideas you've been taught, caught or personally experienced?

Check The Source

Once you've identified the origin of those thoughts, ask yourself:

Are those sources really credible? What biases exist? Are those ideas real or just perceptions?

Video: Dispute

Dispute and Refute

By disputing negative thoughts, you're helping your brain to rewrite your software.

Remember:

1. Observe It
2. Dispute it
3. Make a different choice

Disputing Shifts Your Thinking

Think about Thomas Edison. He tried 1,000 times to make the lightbulb work. When he failed, instead of allowing the thought of “This is never going to work,” to enter his mind, he disputed it by saying, “Now I’ve found another way that this doesn’t work.” He didn’t give up. He didn’t allow negative thoughts to be a barrier to his work.

Practice

Disputing negative thoughts and replacing them with positive ones has to become a daily practice in your work life.

Take the time right now to make some reminders of positive thoughts you can use to replace the negative ones. Add them as pop-ups in your calendar. Stick a post-it note on your notebook. Take one small step to get you started.

What practices will you put in place to help you:

Observe It

Dispute it

Make a different choice?

Video: Find

Find Positive People

Of the people you work with, who has the healthiest mindset? What can you do to model that behavior?

Mentor Check-In

Set up a time to talk your mentor for about 20 minutes. Ask, “What do you do to stay positive in the face of adversity? What practices to you use to maintain a positive outlook?”

List their feedback here:

Suggestions

What are some of their suggestions that you're planning to incorporate into your own way of thinking?

Video: Self-Talk

Flip the Script

Isolate those negative thoughts and rewrite them for yourself in an optimistic framework. For example: “What ever made me think I could be a leader?...” could be flipped to say, “I was brought on to do this job because I have a proven track record of success. I am a leader.” Or “My boss saw that I was capable of doing this work well. I have start believing in myself.”

Your Team

If you think something can be done, then so will your people. If you don't, then neither will they. Your thinking sets the tone.

After getting in touch with your own thinking, begin to look around at your direct reports, your team, and your culture. Do you hear negativity and helplessness?

Negativity Can Permeate

Just because you do not hear people talking about how bad they feel individually doesn't mean that collective negative thinking hasn't become a problem. It can be present in individuals, but it can also be, and often is, present in the group at large.

For example, often we are looking for negativity when individuals think about themselves: like Carl thinking he is a loser. But if we only look at individuals, we miss a big part of the leadership opportunity.

Your Team's Mentality

Negativity can exist in an organization as well. Examples include:

“Our brand is not as strong as the competition’s.” “Our product is not as cool as theirs.” “We are so far behind the competition in R and D.” “Our competitor is so much bigger than us.”

Internal company examples:

“Our division or department does not have the resources that sales does.”
“Management (or the owners, or the board) don’t give us the resources we need to win.” “I can’t do this until I have more people.”

When you think about it, each of these conditions could have truth in them, and you certainly don’t want to replace negativity with denial of reality. Instead you and your team must look at whatever external realities exist and begin to figure out an optimistic response to those realities. There is always something you can do. You as the leader must set a strong boundary against the tendency to greet any circumstance with learned helplessness.

Change Those Voices

If your team thinks: “Our positioning is not as strong as the competition’s.”

Reframe it to: “We have to find new avenues to access.”

If your team thinks: “Our product is not as cool as theirs.”

Reframe it to: “We have to get busy revamping it and in the meantime, communicate our value proposition through service and other offerings.”

If you team thinks: “The other guys are so much bigger than us.”

Reframe it to: “Our size gives us a unique advantage. Let’s show our customers how our size is an asset.”

List some ways you can reframe the persistent negative thoughts in your team. Remember that this is about the group, not the thoughts of specific individuals.

Connect and Change

If negative thinking has become a problem on your team. It's your responsibility to address it. When people are speaking that way, you have got to say. "Hey, that's a really negative way of thinking about that. Let's focus on some solutions here."

If a particular person is muddying the waters, you need to address it, right away. Perhaps that person is going through a hard time personally or professionally and it's directly impacting their work.

I want you to talk to them right now. I mean it. Go find them or pick up the phone. You do need to not pry into their personal life, but you do need to help them to see how their negative thinking is impacting the team. Reference the specific language you're hearing. Ask, "Why do you feel that way? What's going on?"

Ask them what you can do to help them overcome this obstacle, because this current, negative mindset isn't working. Sometimes it just takes a simple conversation to help someone shift their thinking. Let them know you're there to help, not to alienate.

Discussion Results

What did the person say when you talked to them about their negative thinking? What was their body language saying? What are some changes that you and that person are going to work toward implementing together?

Video: Recap

It's On You To Make Lasting Changes

What structure will you set up to implement lasting change in your own thinking model? If you don't give time and space to do that, it probably won't change. So, figure out when, where and how you will begin to work on your thinking. I heard one leader say 'I will begin my day by taking a 5 minute thinking-check up and adjust any thinking I need to change that day. Explain your plan here:

Video: Outro