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The Power of Thinking Grey, Part 3

When It's Time for Thinking Grey

How you can increase your mental horizon

Tim Stevenson

THERE'S A TIME for Binary Thinking (viewing a situation as an Either-Or decision) and a time for Thinking Grey. *Wisdom is to know what time it is.*

Thinking Grey is an alternative way of mentally processing on an issue, one that can lead to significant breakthroughs in problem-solving or, at least, to improvement. In this third article in the series, we will look at ways you can cultivate and apply this quality.

I first encountered the term in *The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership* by Steven B.

Sample. In that book he identifies maintaining your **intellectual independence** and **creative freedom** as the most important benefits of learning to Think Grey.

You must be intellectually independent and creatively free in order to challenge conventional wisdom.

There are some premises, assumptions that we should establish before launching into a discussion of Thinking Grey.

Establish a firm foundation

1. *Determine to protect your intellectual independence and creative freedom.*

Thinking well is hard work, and it takes effort to do it well. It is far easier to go with what is accepted as conventional wisdom.

I'll bet when you were young your mom or dad told you, "Just because everybody's

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doing it doesn't make it right." That's something I believe all leaders and managers need to remember as well. The business world is full of ideas, ways, and means "everybody" assumes are right, but which are in need of challenge. The only person who will challenge conventional wisdom is someone who is intellectually independent and creatively free.

Leaders need a healthy dose of skepticism. The history of every profession, including medicine and the sciences, is littered with assumptions and methods that were once accepted as obvious but later ridiculed as nonsense. The same is true of business theories and practices. Consider what others tell you, yes, but be independent enough to consult and follow your own best judgment. The first step, therefore, is making up your mind that you won't go blindly with the crowd.

2. Hold to unchanging core principles.

Thinking Grey does *not* mean that everything is up for grabs. There are surely some right or wrong issues, and your core values should be written in stone. Particular applications might be fuzzy and debatable, but not the core principles.

It is your core values, in fact, that make it *safe* to Think Grey. They give you a rock-solid foundation from which to explore possibilities and challenge common assumptions. They not only are step one in building a culture by design; they also provide the firm foundation required for Thinking Grey.

Suggestions for Thinking Grey

First a disclaimer: This study is not a substitute for common sense, nor is it a call for indecisiveness in routine decision-making. It is rather the recognition that where Thinking Grey is appropriate, it is a serious drawback to fail to recognize it and stick to binary reasoning.

1. Pause and ask, "What time is it?"

I suggest you write down the following sentences and keep them before you:

There is a time for Binary Thinking, and a time for Thinking Grey. Wisdom is to know what time it is.

Then, when faced with new information or when addressing a problem, ask yourself, **"What time is it?"** Rather than reacting instinctively, you'll begin developing **the habit of first asking what kind of situation you are facing**. That moment of pause and reflection alone can make a great difference in improving your analyzing and problem-solving ability.

2. Reserve judgment until you've heard all the relevant facts.

The problem most of us deal with is forming opinions too quickly. We are simply too fast in assessing situations and making judgments. If we have a track record of being good at quick judgments, it makes it even harder to recognize ambiguous situations or issues where more information is required.

A prime example is having to intervene in conflicts between people. I know you've been there: The first person comes and presents a completely coherent account of the situation or incident. The answer seems so obvious! That is, until the second person comes and presents the other side of the story. If you make up your mind at the first hearing, you'll surely regret it.

In many cases you'll never actually be sure about the truth of the matter or what really happened. But by Thinking Grey and reserving judgment you can maintain the detachment needed to identify the real issue, the principle at the heart of the problem.

Managers sometimes make the mistake of getting wrapped around the axle trying to figure out the facts of a conflict while missing the larger issue: How the parties involved

responded to the conflict. A problem and a person's reaction to a problem are two different things. We are not always responsible for the fact that a problem or conflict exists, *but we are always responsible for our* **behavior** *as a* **result** *of a problem.* By remaining detached and reserving judgment, a leader can see the bigger picture and help people focus on the right things.

3. Keep applying your creativity by pressing for multiple options.

Thinking well is hard work, and we all sometimes want to take the easy way out. The way to resist that impulse is by forcing yourself or your team to come up with more answers.

When seeking possible actions to address a problem, don't settle for Either-Or. **Think, "Either-Or … Or … Or … Or …"**

By making the effort, you find that you can indeed come up with more and better ideas for action than you saw at first glance.

4. When addressing a problem, think "What?" before "How?"

Have you ever noticed how many times people shoot down some of their own ideas almost as soon as they are out of their mouths? "I could try that, but it would never work." If you mix up the question "*What* should we do?" with the question "*How* can we do it?" the result is paralysis.

That's why I teach the problem-solving principle, "Think 'What?' before 'How?'" First identify **what** in an ideal world should be done, and separate it from the question of **how** to pull it off. Only **after** identifying the right thing to do should you begin applying your creative brain work on how to do it.

5. Adopt the philosophy that "Incremental improvement is good!"

Binary thinkers tend to reject anything other than the "perfect" solution. In the real world that isn't always possible.

I like to use a baseball analogy. In the major leagues a .275 hitter is considered about average. A .325 hitter is going to be an All-Star, and if he does it over his entire career, will end up in the Hall of Fame.

But, do you know that actual difference between a .275 hitter and a .325 hitter? Over the course of a season it is **about one hit a week**! It doesn't have to be a home run. It can be a bunt single, a blooper over the infield, a beat-out grounder. But one more of those a week over the course of the six-month baseball season means a rise of 50 points.

When you're talking about high performers in the business world, quantum leaps of performance are highly unlikely. Significant improvement can be attained, however, through the business equivalent of one more hit a week. That's why I say, "Incremental improvement is good!"

Think of getting 20% more discretionary time … 15% more revenue … 10% reduction in costs … 15% faster getting routine work done. You'll see: Little things really can add up to big results.

So instead of doing nothing because there is no *perfect* solution, why not try to gain incremental improvement in some nagging challenges facing you?

Try some of these applications of Thinking Grey, and see how they impact your life and work. L[i]