



## ATTITUDINAL AGRICULTURE (Manage Your Thinking and Attitudes)

*"Consciousness can be shown to be a constructed reality . . . What is experienced as reality is actually only a representation [and] . . . consciousness may be altered simply by changing the manner of its construction."* (Robert Ornstein, *The Psychology of Consciousness*)

To his housekeeper's inquiry, *"Would you like a cup of tea Monsieur?"* French philosopher Rene Descartes replied, *"I think not"* and vanished forever. We don't know he ever became aware of this often-reported validation of his hypothesis, *"I think therefore I am."*

### What do you think?

How much does it matter what we think from moment to moment? Or how we think? The answer, according to an increasingly large and persuasive body of research and writing, is more than you might have thought.

Whatever you are doing right now, whatever you feel, whatever your perspective of the day's events and whatever you want or will do next - are all determined by the quality of your thinking and thought systems. We constantly cultivate our thinking and harvest the resulting attitudes.

When we first learn to pay attention to the activity of our own mind, it is common to discover and to be surprised by two things:

- We constantly generate good/bad judgements about our experiences and expectations of future experiences. These tend to dominate our minds and lock us into unconscious mechanical reactions. Some have no objective basis at all. Many are particularly unhelpful.
- Many of our thought processes do not resemble critical thinking; they are unhelpfully reactive, impulsive, disorganised and improvisational.

Since few people realise the powerful role their thought processes play in their lives, few gain significant command of them. Mostly, they're unaware that what they think and how they reason are continual sources of problems that direct energy away from where it is most needed and direct it instead to fruitless efforts. They cannot monitor their thinking and modify poor thinking.

If your thinking is unrealistic, it will lead you to disappointments. If improvisational rather than methodical, you may act randomly and others will experience you as *all over the place*. If overly pessimistic, you will often be anxious and overlook things in which you could take pleasure.

When your thinking follows sound logic, constructive processes, mature and psychologically healthy beliefs, you are likely to do whatever is right and enjoy the moment.

By better understanding our thinking and thought processes we can learn to alter our attitudes, feelings and desires. This can lead to increased emotional intelligence, decreased stress, and a better ability to serve and influence others with integrity; we can make better decisions, solve problems more efficiently, plan and act more constructively, reduce friction in relationships and get better results from groups and teams.

## Mental floss

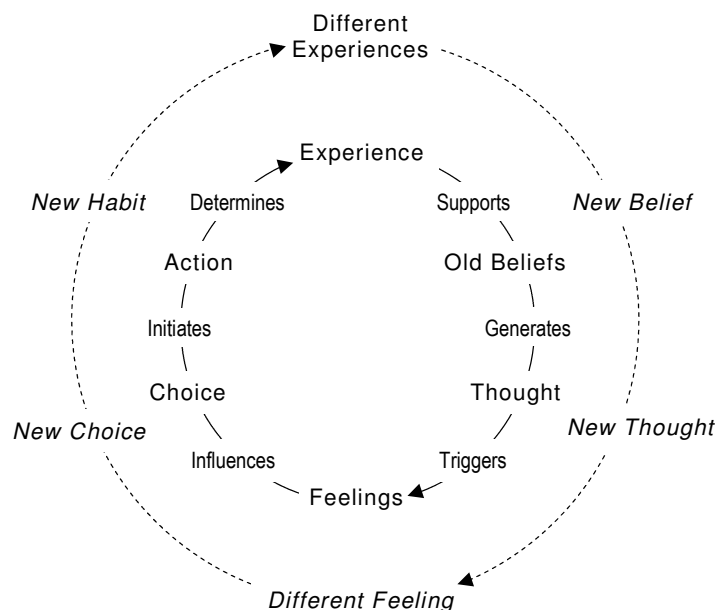
The development of our personal thought systems can be traced back through many generations of our family. From what they passed on, we came to accept a certain series of conclusions about life, others and ourselves. We learned to see that which we were taught to look for, to notice what we were taught to notice, to make the judgements others made about what we notice, and to have the aversions or desires we do. Our attitudes about life can be summarised as a series of thoughts we came to believe as truth.

There's no doubt that much of that serves us very well. Some aspects, however, may not serve our best interests and it is possible to change them, once we know what they are.

There is nothing holding our attitudes in place other than our willingness to retain them. They are not based on absolute truth: they are perceptions based on our individual versions of life. They are not in our genes: if they were, they would be identical to those of others in our family. They are not due to our current circumstances: if they were, positive attitudes would be tied to positive circumstances and negative attitudes to difficult circumstances. We all know this isn't universally the case: many people seem to thrive on challenge and some in very difficult circumstances are happy simply to be alive. Hardships that others endure do not always cause us adversity. The key difference is attitude arising from thought. Each one of us is predisposed to a certain way of thinking.

## Metacognition

Once we see how little there is holding our predisposition to certain attitudes in place we can begin to challenge our own thoughts. Although it takes strength and wisdom to distrust habitual thinking, the good news is that when we stop using your ability to think against ourselves or to decide that there are only habitual ways of doing or regarding things, we are left with healthy psychological functioning – our most natural state of mind. All we have to do is pay more attention to our thinking and avoid the mental processes that interfere with healthy, constructive functioning. The process is called *metacognition*: thinking about and modifying our thinking processes as we use them.



*Metacognition* is an essential aspect of critical thinking and one indicator of emotional intelligence. The more we engage in metacognition, the better is our ability to identify and strengthen those aspects of our thinking that serve us well, and to find and change those that do not.

There is a great deal of power and potential in this. We can become more mature thinkers and experience less anxiety, guilt, stress, displeasure and resentment than we currently do. We can control our attitudes towards any or all of what happens to us, including challenge and adversity. We can undo whatever unnecessarily complex, harshly judgemental, pointless, problematic habits of thoughts and process we learned, and become clearer, more strategic, more critical thinkers. By doing so we may change our lives.

## **Cultivation and harvest**

Further good news is that unlike your desires or feelings, we can have direct access to our thinking.

The mind is composed of three functions: thinking, feeling, and desiring or wanting. Wherever one of these functions is present, the other two are also present. These three functions are continually influencing and being influenced by one another. We do not change feelings by substituting other feelings, or desires by substituting other desires. It is only our thinking that we have direct access to. We can discover our thoughts and consider new ways to think. We can experiment with new thinking and change our patterns and habits of thought. And when our thinking changes, our feelings, desires and behaviours shift in accordance with the change.

We constantly cultivate our thinking and harvest the resulting attitudes.

It's easy to demonstrate that the fuzzy or faulty logic behind everyday approaches to leading and managing collaboration is largely subconscious and unhelpful. For example:

- Even though values form the basis of all they do every day, many managers and leaders are unable to articulate their values, other than in the form of relatively meaningless bumper-sticker slogans.
- They are often unable to articulate the range of decision-making processes they routinely use, describe the circumstances in which one is preferable over another, or even define the generic process of management.
- It is unusual for leaders to be able to define leadership, teams to explain what constitutes a team or teamwork, and for those who believe they use "consensus" to define the term or the process.
- Groups whose duty it is to routinely resolve differences, conflict and problems or manage and improve their own effectiveness usually do not methodically design, monitor, refine and evaluate them. Under scrutiny, their current practices frequently demonstrate wasted effort and energy at best and more serious dysfunction at worst.
- Individuals display considerable unawareness of their actual interpersonal behaviours in the face of conflict, differences or confrontation, and even less self-awareness of the attitudinal bases of those behaviours.

It is common for people's lives to be based moment to moment on subconscious thinking and thought processes never explicitly put into words. Those who think negatively usually do not say of themselves, *"I am choosing to think about myself and my experience in largely negative terms. I prefer to be as unhappy as possible."*

Those who withhold through anxiety from giving honest feedback to others usually do not explicitly register the most common thinking behind their decision: *"I choose to exaggerate the possible"*

*consequences and deny the probable benefits of my doing this to the point where I become immobilised through fear."*

Those who choose to avoid confrontation with those of whom they may say, *"They ought to know better and it's not my job to tell them"*, usually don't explore their own willingness to deny their authenticity, and potential strength – or to see themselves as powerless victims of others' actions.

People who are persistently frustrated, irritable or angry rarely attribute this to the prime cause: their holding in their minds an idea of perfection against which they constantly judge themselves (or others) as failures.

Very many current authors address these topics, and as a "generation" we may be the first to understand the potential it offers. Nonetheless, I am surprised by how few people incorporate critical thinking or attitudinal change within their targets for personal or professional development. For over 15 years, participants in my *Managing Effective Relationships* and *Hear and Be Heard* interpersonal skills training programmes have discovered how powerful it is to understand that *"Although I **may** be able, eventually, to change my mind by changing my behaviour, I **can** change my mind and a behavioural change usually follows."*

## Start here

A good deal of my work as a coach and mentor assists clients to become more critical thinkers and more self-aware self-managers. This usually involves learning to (i) study the connections between personal attitudes and habits of mind, thought processes, feelings, choices and action; (ii) become less improvisational and more consistently methodical; and (iii) distil more meaning (laws and principles of action, for example) from everyday experience.

The first step is to learn to **pay attention** to our practices and our thinking by separating *what?* from *how?* - task, topic or agenda from process. With raised awareness and careful observation we can eventually find the origins, structures, processes and logical composition of our thinking.

To a novice it may sound difficult but it soon produces results, especially if skilled support is available. My clients, for example, soon establish in relation to handling conflict and differences that a fundamental and often-present reference point is these beliefs: *"Conflict is dangerous, destructive and leads to unhappy outcomes. I cannot deal with it. I should remain a powerless victim of other people's decisions."* When those **are** the reference points for a current or prospective conflict, people quickly become anxious, worried or fearful because of thoughts such as these:

- *This has been dreadful in the past. I can guarantee it will be this time, too.*
- *It's going to be too painful. I'd better avoid it or deny its reality.*
- *I'd better make sure I defend myself well, by attacking first or retaliating in kind.*
- *Why bother? I may as well give up now, before things get worse.*

The natural consequences of such thoughts are emotions and behaviours that reinforce the original belief or set of beliefs. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy; a closed loop.

With practice, it is entirely possible to train ourselves to habituate new beliefs, thoughts and behaviours.

## Further support

Study what others have researched and written about these topics. Some useful books include:

- *Destructive Emotions And How We Can Overcome Them*, The Dalai Lama and Daniel Goleman, (Bantam Books 2003)
- *Critical Thinking*, Richard Paul and Linda Elder, (Prentice Hall, 2001)
- *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman, (Bloomsbury, 1996)
- *Stop Thinking, Start Living*, Richard Carlson, (Harper Collins, 1993)
- *Change You Mind, Change Your Life (Concepts in Attitudinal Healing)*, Gerald Jampolsky and Dian Cirincione, (Bantam Books, 1993)
- *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, Jon Kabat-Zinn, (Delta, 1991).
- *Metacognition: Knowing about Knowing*, Janet Metcalfe and Arthur P Shimamura (eds).
- *Mind Wide Open: Your Brain and the Neuroscience of Everyday Life*, Steven Johnson.
- *Prisoners of Belief: Exposing and Changing Beliefs That Control Your Life*, Matthew McKay and Patrick Fanning.
- *Habits of Mind*, Arthur L Costa and Bena Kallick (eds). A developmental series of four titles.
- *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman.
- *You'll See it When You Believe It*, Wayne Dwyer.
- *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*, Nathaniel Branden.
- *You Can't Afford the Luxury of a Negative Thought*, John-Roger and Peter McWilliams.
- *Loving What Is*, Byron Katie.
- *Critical Thinking: How to Prepare Students for a Rapidly Changing World*, Richard Paul.
- *Teaching for Thinking*, Raths, Wassermann, Jonas and Rothstein.

Thinking skills websites:

- [http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/thinking/info\\_articles.cfm](http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/thinking/info_articles.cfm)
- [www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/6/cu11.html](http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/6/cu11.html)
- [www.mycoted.com/creativity/techniques/index.php](http://www.mycoted.com/creativity/techniques/index.php)
- [www.newhorizons.org/strategies/thinking/front\\_thinking.htm](http://www.newhorizons.org/strategies/thinking/front_thinking.htm)

In relation to interpersonal communication processes, (including conflict resolution and problem-solving processes), I recommend my own work in *Hear and Be Heard* (the workbook and guidebook) for its focus on discovering and altering the attitudinal bases of the behaviours we use for relating to others.

A good deal of my one-to-one work as a tutor, coach and mentor involves helping clients become more self-aware self-managers, more critical thinkers and more adroit exponents of constructive processes for the day-to-day stuff of working with, managing or leading others. My job is to help them make common sense ideas common practice.

Let me know (visit my website) when you're ready to develop your competence in these fields. I'll be pleased to assist your progress.

Cup of tea . . ?

*The mind is its own place and in itself can make a hell of heaven or a heaven of hell.*  
John Milton, Paradise Lost

Tom Watkins

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