

Quality #4: Discipline and Structure

Barriers to connection and productivity

In addition to being resistant to structure, these very unique thought processes can impede both connection with others and productivity.

First, these thoughts can be obsessive. Do you remember the movie, War Games, in which one of my favorite actors, Matthew Broderick, hacks into the mainframe computer at NORAD and naively engages in a friendly game of thermonuclear warfare? The computer does not view the exercise as a game. Wanting to win what it perceives as a real war, the computer seeks to calculate the launch codes for all US intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Do you remember the movie? If so, do you remember the computer's name? It was WOPR – pronounced “whopper.” If you have seen the movie, reflect back on the camera angles, lighting, music and sound effects as the WOPR obsessively crunches massive amounts of data, unwilling to quit until the launch codes have been identified, missiles fired, and the war won.

When these thoughts are unbalanced we have what is tantamount to a WOPR between our ears. What do you do to shut off your mind? I posed that question to an audience of about 600. A man in the back left side of room shouted out, “I drink!” If that were my method for anesthetizing this noise, not sure I would have shared that bit of information publicly, but it spoke volumes. Many seek a remedy for this incessant noise. Some watch television. Others exercise. Many

listen to music. And yes, some may even use artificial means to deaden the noise. Seriously, what do you do to shut off your mind?

Second, these thoughts processes are dualistic in nature. Just like the thoughts involved in the mental creation of our vision, when unbalanced these thoughts see the world in absolutes - right/wrong, win/lose, yes/no, all/nothing, perfect/non-existent, black/white, life/death. There is no spectrum or gradation – just polar opposites. They want you to see the world the same way. Here are some common examples:

“We will do it this way or I don’t want my name on it.”

“If they are late, everything is ruined!”

“If we can’t be on time, why go at all?”

“If it rains, the day will be a disaster!”

“I can’t do anything under these conditions!”

“If this doesn’t work, it will cost me everything!”

“I have no other choice!”

And we could go on and on. The very favorite phrase is this one, “Yes, but...”

When the only other option appears to be untenable, we will fight for what we think is right. If these thoughts are out of balance and we allow them to be in control of our life, we may find ourselves directing, controlling, or fixing everyone we do not agree with and everything we deem as wrong. These thoughts do not measure “seriousness” or

“magnitude” of the topic at hand. Everything and anything that is not perfect needs to be fixed or corrected. This does not mean that we have to listen and act accordingly. It’s just that we often do.

I can picture a father sitting at the breakfast table, reading the newspaper while occasionally eating a spoonful of cereal. His son, an avid Lakers fan, walks into the room and asks, “How about those Lakers? Beat the Mavs 102 to 98.” Problem. Dad, an avid Mavs fan, watched the game to the bitter end and the score was in fact 105 to 104. The Lakers barely pulled it out in the last minute with a classic Kobe Bryant three-point shot. Does dad engage his son in a fun discussion about their mutual love for the game of basketball? Does he mention some of the spectacular plays Kobe made going down the stretch? Or, does he simply correct his son’s error. If his thoughts are out of balance, the world is on tilt, it is wrong, until the score has been corrected. If he steps back he will realize that loving his son is more important than correcting a score. Why, the reason can be found in the next challenge.

Third, when we listen to these thoughts we crush people.

Consider this: 95% of the population can’t separate their ideas from their self-worth. In other words, ideas and self-worth are inextricably connected.

To better understand this critical principle. Put your two hands together and intertwine your fingers. Now squeeze your hands together as tightly as you can. Imagine that your left hand represents someone’s idea. Your right hand represents their self-worth. Now attempt to point

out the flaws in this person's idea without negatively impacting their self-worth. It is nearly impossible.

The message is clear. If you don't like their idea, you must not like them. If you think their idea is bad or wrong, you must think that they are bad or wrong. When we challenge a person's idea, 95% of the time it is personal. Now turn the table and we may discover why we fight back when someone challenges our ideas. Those closest to us seem to know these buttons and are often very good at pushing them. The same can be said for many of us.

Let's reflect for a moment on our father and son and the Lakers' game. Did the score really matter? Of course it did. However, was it more important to be right about the score and run the risk of crushing a son? Of course not. Try this one on and see how it fits.

A husband and wife decide to sneak away and see a movie in the middle of the day. The husband checks out theaters on the Internet and picks the closest one. The drive will be about 30 minutes so they decided to call and check in with each of their three grown children.

The first child asks, "Which movie are you going to see?" Husband responds, "Elizabeth, The Golden Age." Whispering, his wife corrects him, "... Queen of the Golden Age." He knows the correct title. He just looked it up on the Internet ten minutes prior, but corrects himself and responds, "Oh, Elizabeth, Queen of the Golden Age."

They end the call and connect with a second child. Eventually that child asks, “Which movie are you going to see?” Husband responds while trying to remember his wife’s first correction, “Elizabeth, Queen of the Golden Years.” His wife whispers, “Golden Age.” He makes the correction, “Oh, Golden Age.”

Call ends and they quickly call their third child. Of course this child is also curious and asks, “Which movie are you going to see?” Husband is really trying to remember his wife’s correction and responds while stammering, “Elizabeth, of the Golden Age.” Wife corrects by whispering, “Queen...” Husband corrects himself, “that’s Queen of the Golden Age.”

About this time they arrive at the theater. Husband pops out of the car and open the car door for his wife who he adores. She looks up at the marquee and says, “Oh, it is Elizabeth, The Golden Age.”

If you were the husband, what would you say? Would it sound like, “That’s what I have been trying to tell you?” or “Told you so.” What would be different if we simply said, “It’s just a movie.” Implicit in this response is, “I love YOU more than the name of a stupid movie!”

Crushing right/wrong battles can start over things as silly as the topping on a pizza. This multiplied several times over several petty things and we can blow apart a relationship whether it be personal or professional. Just know these thoughts need to be right and they will often crush people to be right. However, we can choose to be conscious,

step back, and make different choices. When we step back, let us ask ourselves, “Is it worth crushing someone to be right about this idea (whatever it might be)?” If we can do this, and we can, we will make better choices at these pivotal moments.

Know that the harder we are pounding our fist, the more likely our thought processes are giving us bad advice.

Fourth, when we listen to these thoughts we create expectations. We may constantly or obsessively think about new, better, or easier ways to do things. We may focus more on “outcomes” than on the process of getting from here to there (doing). When we focus with such intent, our mind creates what neuroscientists call “mental constructs.” A more common word used to describe this phenomenon is expectation – a concrete condition for happiness. We create expectations by obsessively amending, changing, expanding and improving on an idea or vision until it is perfect. It is much like the process used in constructing a building, thus a mental construct.

Even though an expectation exists only in our mind, it is a done deal. It is what happened. It is the way we see it. It is real. Changing an expectation is like trying to change history. You can’t change what has already happened. If an expectation is a concrete condition for happiness and it is dualistic in nature - all or nothing, life or death, absolutes – can you see why challenging an expectation sets the stage for a classic right/wrong battle. The knife cuts both ways. It may be our expectation that is being challenged or we may be challenging someone else’s.

Consider a time in your life when you had a really good idea – one that you had been considering for some time. This would be something you really wanted to do - something for which you felt strongly. However, when you presented your idea, it was rejected or disvalued. Those with whom you shared the idea wanted to make drastic changes in direction and focus. Did you feel a sense of loss? Did you attempt to defend your idea? If so, what did you say or do? What impact did this have on your relationship? Did you surrender, give in, or give up? If yes, what price did you pay?

Fifth, when we listen to these thought processes we experience physiological reactions. Lacrimal glands secrete tears. Salivary glands secrete saliva. Sweat glands secrete sweat. The reproductive organs secrete eggs and sperm rich seminal fluids. Threats to expectations cause the sympathetic nervous system to secrete large doses of epinephrine (adrenaline) and cortisol causing stress, anxiety, fear, anger and even emotional paralysis. Yes, the body autonomically gets involved in the process.

Remember what happens when a fantasy is threatened by reality. Same is true of these expectations. They can be so real that our body reacts physiologically - physically. It is not just in the mind. The body experiences and we “feel” the threat. It feels like we are being attacked and this only compounds the profound influence these unbalanced thoughts can wield in our lives.

Now you know why we can get so attached to an idea. Obsessive thought processes create mental constructs or expectations. These thoughts are dualistic in nature – all or nothing – and we do not want to be nothing. Our self-esteem is challenged 95% of the time so it is personal when someone challenges or threatens an expectation. And our body gets involved.

What happens when life threatens your expectations? For example: What happens when someone in a position of authority does not agree with you? What happens when a rule, regulation, policy, or procedure suddenly impedes your progress? What happens when a driver cuts you off in traffic or you get a flat tire on the way to an important meeting? What happens when you experience unexpected health or financial challenges? How about unfair time restrictions?

When these threats occur do you ever get a surge of anxiety or fear? If so, where in your body do you generally experience it, stomach, neck, shoulders, etc.?

Metaphorically speaking: Why is it that when our neighbor offends us we burn down our own house?

When we listen to these thought processes we may engage in catastrophizing. Just when you think you have enough there is one more challenge that can impact connection and productivity. When an expectation is threatened, our thoughts will automatically go from “everything is perfect” to “everything is horrible” – a dualistic response

that creates a never ending downward spiral of worse case scenarios. This is called catastrophizing or pessimistic thinking.

The very real physiological reactions that simultaneously occur at the cellular level when expectations are threatened serve only to confirm our worst fears. Add to this dualistic thinking and we can turn a molehill into a mountain in a moment. To further compound this challenge, the feelings of anxiousness, fear, and stress can be misinterpreted as intuition. As a result we risk the possibility of reading into these feelings much more than is actually happening and then acting upon this “intuition.” We call these impressions “Straw Stories.”

Treat your hand as if it were a telescope by making a loose fist. Hold your hand to your dominant eye and look at an object across the room. How much can you really see? Have you ever been given a small piece of information (a glance, smile, frown, phone call, email, comment, gossip) and from that small piece of information created an elaborate story around what it “really” means, what is “really” happening? If so, have you ever reacted based on this “intuitive” feeling believing it was accurate? How often have you discovered that it was not as it appeared (not as good, not as serious)? Do you ever find yourself apologizing for these reactions? Much of the time, the feelings that create these Straw Stories are simply the result of a chemical reaction caused by a threat to an expectation.

In what ways have these thoughts been a barrier to connection and productivity in your life? Are they negatively impacting your health

(burning down your own house)? In Scroll VII: I will laugh at the world, Og recommends the cathartic – cleansing – qualities of laughter. He writes, *“I will smile and my digestion will improve; I will chuckle and my burdens will be lightened; I will laugh and my life will be lengthened for this is the great secret of long life and now it is mine. I will laugh at the world.”*