

TAKING UP YOUR ROLE

How to shift between life and work
without losing yourself



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CHAPTER 9

Thought as a tool

While it's possible to think about our professional role in a fairly neutral way, sometimes we've invested so much of ourselves in that role that it's difficult to shift our thoughts and attitudes in the way that's expected of us. Often, it's our habitual patterns of thinking that create obstacles and inner resistance when something needs to change at work. As we described in Chapter 2, staying in our role requires adaptability, and this applies as much to our thinking as to our behavior. When the external environment changes, a behavior that once was useful may become ineffective. In the same way, a pattern of thought that worked for us in the past can become a liability if we stubbornly cling to it when the context requires a new way of thinking. There are also some very common ways of thinking that tend to be unproductive in any context, such as rehashing blameful stories about the past or catastrophizing about the future.

Therefore, if we want to move away from self-focused behavior and act more in harmony with our role at work, we need to tighten up our thinking and align it with the tasks at hand. This means critically examining how we interpret certain situations—how we draw conclusions and make decisions about what we observe and experience. The exercise at the end of Chapter 5 serves as a basic foundation for that type of analysis. In the sections that follow, we'll delve deeper into this issue.

Past, present, and future

As human beings we have an incredible ability to control our thinking. First and foremost, we can think in three different time

frames: we can remember things that happened in the past, we can perceive things that are happening right now, and we can imagine things that may or may not happen in the future. This is primarily a good thing; it helps us to move forward, especially in the workplace. If we lacked the ability to look backward and evaluate past efforts, or to plan future projects, we'd have a hard time getting anything accomplished.

But the flexibility of our thinking also has a flip side. Sometimes, we feel and act as though something is happening *right now*, when in reality it either happened in the past or hasn't happened yet. We get fixated on an unsuccessful organizational change that happened a long time ago, or we work ourselves up into a frenzy about negotiations that are still weeks away.

Wherever we find ourselves—at our desk, in a meeting, or at home in front of the television—we often run into trouble when we dwell on what happened in the past or might happen in the future, instead of noticing and relating to what we can experience in the present.

A single mother has finally sat down in front of the television with her two children on a Friday night to watch a Disney movie. The dishwasher rumbles in the background, there's a glass of red wine on the coffee table, and the kids are lounging on the couch in their pajamas. The only thing left to do is brush their teeth later—or maybe they can just fall asleep where they are, while she watches the romantic comedy she's been wanting to see. Everything is quiet and peaceful.

Then suddenly she realizes that she still hasn't arranged child-care for the following Saturday, when she's been invited out to dinner with friends. It doesn't take long for her thoughts to get taken over by memories of past difficulties she's had in finding a babysitter, which starts to seem like an insurmountable task.

She loses touch with the relaxed atmosphere of the present moment and is unable to experience how good things are right now.

An employee is on his way to the first staff meeting with his department's new manager. He knows very little about this person but thinks back to his previous manager, whom he didn't get along with. The closer he gets to the meeting room, the more absorbed he becomes in memories of various confrontations he had with his old boss.

By the time he steps into the room and greets the new manager, he's in a rather gloomy, suspicious frame of mind, which in turn leads the manager to feel a bit uneasy around him.

Facts and interpretations

In addition to thinking in different time frames, in any given context we can also switch between paying attention to hard facts and adding on our own interpretations.

Our interpretive frames act as colored glasses through which we view the events occurring around us and within ourselves. The coloring of the glasses is created by the conclusions and generalizations we've taken away from our past experiences. To some extent, this perspective is necessary. Generalizations from the past enable us to make quick, overall judgments of different situations, which helps us understand what's happening and act in a sensible way. But we also need to remember that those are just our interpretations, not absolute facts. Sometimes our interpretations are wrong; our conclusions from the past were incorrect, or they don't apply to the situation we're in now, and we need to adjust our behavior accordingly. Failing to recognize this possibility, and instead perceiving our incorrect interpretations as facts, can cause great difficulties for us.

Karen is so quiet in this meeting. She's usually so chatty.

Interpretation: I wonder if she doesn't like what I said about the new business plan. It's so irritating when people can't just be straightforward and honest. Of course she'll probably bitch about it to Kevin later.

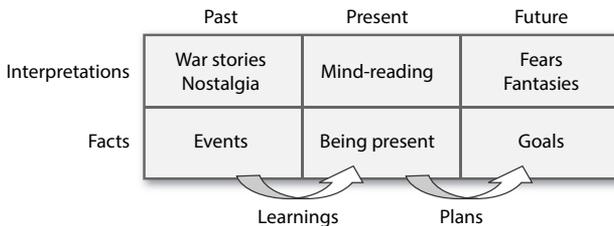
Fact: Karen is dealing with a serious personal problem that she hasn't had a chance to mention to any of her colleagues. She knows that her silence will probably lead to speculation, but she can't decide whether it's appropriate to raise the issue in this meeting; there's been so much talk lately about how important it is to separate personal and professional roles.

Here and now

In order to be able to solve problems and make good decisions, we need to be present in the moment and base our reasoning primarily on facts, rather than interpretations. The more complex or turbulent a situation is—for instance, when our organization is undergoing a major change—the more important it is to focus on the here and now and collect the facts we need to make realistic plans for the future. But often, paradoxically, we do just the opposite, losing ourselves in self-focused interpretations and oversimplifications about what’s happened or what lies ahead.

A model for understanding our thought patterns

The following model illustrates the different types of thinking generated by the time frame and type of information we focus on.



Loosely based on the work of Kurt Lewin and Yvonne Agazarian

The columns represent the dimension of time, capturing the difference between looking backward, looking forward, and focusing on the here and now. On the top row are our subjective, often one-sided and generalizing interpretations of reality. On the bottom row are more reality-based patterns of thinking, which are capable of accommodating the paradoxes and unpredictability of our existence. In the remainder of this chapter, we’ll describe each of these thought patterns in greater detail.

Interpretations of the past: War stories and nostalgia

When we travel back in time through our interpretations of the past, we often do so with negative overtones in the form of *war stories*. These are emotional stories about what has failed to work, whose fault it is, and how either our working group or we as an individual have suffered as a result.

- It's always been like this. Dysfunction is woven into the very fabric of this organization.
- We learned to stop bringing up issues. Nobody ever listens to this department.
- The last reorganization ruined everything!

These characterizations frequently contain a grain of truth, but the generalizing interpretation and emotional charge turn them into war stories. War stories cast a dark shadow over the present and can generate a feeling of hopelessness that keeps discussions mired in pessimism. It may feel as though we're processing an issue, but actually we're stuck in quicksand; the more we talk, the deeper we sink into a negative, fatalistic point of view.

Interpretations of the past that have a more positive spin can be categorized as *nostalgia*.

- Things were so much better in the old days!
- Remember the manager we used to have? He knew how to get things done.
- In the past, employees used to have respect for their superiors. They weren't so arrogant and impertinent.

Idealizing the past is often used as a way of criticizing the current situation. We emphasize how bad it is right now by exaggerating how good things used to be. Just like war stories, nostalgia can prevent constructive efforts to solve problems and make decisions.

Interpretations of the future: Fears and fantasies

Another type of thinking that can get us into trouble is worrying about things that have not yet happened, and may never happen. There's a famous quotation on this topic (frequently, though erroneously, attributed to Mark Twain):

"I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened."

This witty remark captures a deep psychological truth. A great deal of human suffering results not from actual events in the world, but from our own thinking—and particularly from our thoughts about the future. We feel anxiety, uneasiness, or fear as a consequence of thoughts such as:

- It will never work!
- I know I'll make a fool of myself.
- The new management will ruin everything!

Fantasies and positive speculations are the flip side of fears. They may not be as paralyzing as constant worrying, but they can still prevent us from getting a realistic perspective on the future. Some fantasies tend to turn us into passive spectators, discouraging us from being as active and involved as we could be:

- As soon as the new management team is in place, everything will be fine.
- Once we move to the beautiful new office space, everyone will be so much happier, and they'll forget about all these petty conflicts.
- Just give it another month or two. This problem will take care of itself.

Both fantasies and fears can lead us to place responsibility for future events outside of ourselves. We end up sitting in passive

anticipation of the terrible thing that's going to happen or the perfect solution that's going to magically appear.

Interpretations of the present: Mind-reading

Even when we focus on what is happening right now, we still run the risk of misinterpretations and erroneous judgments. Mind-reading is thinking that we can know what someone else thinks, feels, or wants, even though they haven't told us—as though those things are hidden behind what the person actually says or does, and we can “read between the lines.” Far too often, we act as though our mind-reads are true. In reality, sometimes they're accurate, and sometimes they're not. Therefore it's important to test our mind-reads frequently, checking to see whether our ideas about the other person are right or wrong. Otherwise, we can easily jump to conclusions based on incomplete information, leading to misunderstandings and the spread of rumors.

A manager needs to explain something to her team. She stands up, walks to the whiteboard, and begins drawing diagrams and giving explanations. The employees remain seated.

These are observable facts that everyone can see and agree on. However, those facts can be interpreted in completely different ways:

1) The manager must be drawing those diagrams for instructional purposes, trying to make some complex ideas easier to understand.

2) Typical! The manager takes every opportunity to look down on the employees. Now she's showing her power and disrespect by making them all sit passively while she lectures to them.

3) Poor woman! The manager's back pain must be acting up again, so she's taking the first opportunity to stand and give her back a rest.

These different interpretations will lead to very different feelings and behaviors. Each interpretation is entirely possible, but we can't know which one is true (if any) until we compare our mind-read with reality.
