

# The StraightTalk Coach

## Insights for Leading From Strength

### The Case for Thoughtful Leadership

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Our largest customer is unhappy. *Do something.*”  
“A French organization is interested in a joint venture. What should we *do*?”

“Our biggest competitor just beat us to market with a hot new product. What are we going to *do*?”

“Doing something” is often the predominant focus for leaders facing these or similar problems. That is not surprising, because until recently, managing change was considered the essence of successful leadership. But in today’s complex, globally competitive and highly uncertain environment, accelerating learning is even more critical, because it provides a foundation for implementing the *right* changes.

Many of the leaders we counsel are “action junkies” whose constant changes do not seem to materially affect their organizations’ success. The reason? In an increasingly dynamic marketplace, new learning is a prerequisite for effective change. And thoughtful leadership is a prerequisite for fostering that new learning and applying it productively.

Thoughtful leadership is not about analyzing every piece of data or improving planning processes. Rather, thoughtful leadership means creating a learning organization that is always seeking and reacting to new ideas; a nimble organization that is constantly asking “what next?” and “what if?”;

and an energetic organization that readily generates, refines and implements purposeful new responses to the ever-changing marketplace. Indeed, we firmly believe that thoughtful leadership offers today’s most valuable competitive advantage.

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“The illiterate of the future are not those who cannot read or write. They are those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.”

~ Alvin Toffler

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#### Avid Curiosity

Thoughtful leaders are easily recognized by a voracious curiosity that leads them to improve their breadth and depth of knowledge. They regularly expand their horizons in pursuit of different ideas, concepts and cultures, the intersection of which – as described in *The Medici Effect* by Frans Johansson – may offer new insights to fuel innovative solutions. They constantly explore future possibilities in the hopes of improving tomorrow’s opportunities.

Recognizing that competition for customers and resources readily crosses borders, thoughtful leaders

enthusiastically pursue a global perspective. They also seek to deepen their knowledge of strategic issues, such as the forces affecting current and potential customers, and their own functional disciplines.

#### Alliances of Expertise

No amount of curiosity is likely to equip any individual leader with enough expertise to successfully address today’s complex problems alone. Thoughtful leaders recognize their limits, consciously building teams with functional knowledge and decision-making styles to compensate for them.

Varied styles are particularly important in resolving challenges, because relying exclusively on either analytical or intuitive thinking is likely to provide too narrow a perspective. Thus, thoughtful leaders pay especially close attention to the views of whichever problem-solving approach is most different from their own, and to individuals who have functional expertise they do not.

#### Integrity

The solutions generated by such alliances are only useful to the degree that they accurately reflect internal and external realities, so integrity is another characteristic of thoughtful leadership.

Defining reality is fundamental to successful change. Thoughtful leaders are insistent about using the open,

honest, respectful dialogue of Straight-Talk as a foundation for operating with integrity. Regardless of internal and external pressures, thoughtful leaders do not waver in their commitment to recognize and deal with reality in pursuit of outstanding results.

### **Mental and Emotional Agility**

The high degree of mental and emotional agility demonstrated by thoughtful leaders helps their organizations respond to extremely dynamic situations.

Mental dexterity allows leaders to continually absorb new information, adjusting goals and plans accordingly. Emotional agility helps leaders quickly recover from setbacks and avoid getting carried away by achievements. As a result, they and their organizations stay focused on continuously improving performance by learning from failures and successes.

### **A Balanced Vision**

Although thoughtful leaders respect the past, they tend to look ahead and develop a balanced vision that will create value for investors, customers and employees. In contrast, leaders who skew their vision to satisfy only one set of stakeholders risk tipping their organizations downward.

For example, a leader who elevates generating wealth for investors above all else may cut costs and achieve better returns for a few quarters. In the meantime, he or she may miss new insights from potential customers that would propel the organization to the forefront of product innovation – the results of which would benefit all stakeholders for many years.

Thoughtful leaders' balanced vision inspires and energizes their organizations to challenge what is and expand on what could be by seeking changes that most benefit investors, customers and employees.

### **Thoughtful Leadership in Action**

Not surprisingly, thoughtful leaders behave differently in many common situations.

◆ *Managing Crises.* When a crisis occurs, many leaders shift into damage control, limiting communication and attacking the apparent problem by “fixing” the product, processes or people.

Thoughtful leaders take responsibility for the problem, recognizing that their attitudes, behaviors and decisions strongly influenced the people, processes and products that created it. They typically step back to seek external and internal root causes so they can go beyond simply “fixing the problem” to formulate innovative solutions that build a stronger franchise.

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“Reality is  
unforgivingly complex.”

~ Anne LaMott

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◆ *Managing Time.* Every leader is too busy, but thoughtful leaders carve out an average of one day each week to “getting ahead.” This might mean talking with customers about emerging trends, acquiring new skills or even gazing out the window while dreaming up new products or services. Many organizations measure progress by activity; thoughtful leaders ask investors, customers and employees how to define progress.

◆ *Managing Roles.* While many leaders define their jobs as guiding their organizations to successfully achieve quantifiable objectives, thoughtful leaders define their jobs as being their organization's most proactive student and teacher – its “Chief Learning Officer.” Thoughtful leaders see their organizations as learning labs charged with understanding global realities and generating better solutions that enhance the organization's performance, the competitive field and the global community in which they operate.

### **The Ideal, The Reality**

Is our “thoughtful leader” too perfect? Can anyone live up to these standards?

Yes and no.

Although we portray the ideal thoughtful leader, ask yourself this: are there are any drawbacks to you, your team and your organization becoming more thoughtful? Most leaders quickly realize that making room for thought feeds creative energy, generates new learning, and results in better innovation and more effective change.

Yet the “thoughtful leader” is not an all or nothing proposition. Our culture is so predisposed to action that even fairly small changes can pay “learning dividends.” For example:

◆ Make sure meetings are not simply forums for reporting results; put a major issue on each agenda. Meetings can be places to learn, not just “dog and pony” shows.

◆ Create a “to think” list and schedule time for it on your calendar. Devoting even an hour a week to being thoughtful is likely to represent a quantum leap over the present. Try spending your “think” time in a different location, which will help you look beyond your usual horizons.

◆ Try something different every week or so. Read a book outside your usual fare, take a client to lunch, drop by a museum for half an hour or explore the issues affecting another industry – anything to broaden your perspective and spark new insight.

Above all, recognize that you are the model for your team and your broader organization. If you begin to behave more thoughtfully, others will follow your example. So changing your behavior can generate exponential improvements in your organization's ability to learn, respond and change. By becoming a more thoughtful leader, you can significantly accelerate the pace of learning and effective change that will ultimately drive your organization's success. [HK](#)

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