

Think yourself to the top...

How important are the ways in which you think to your future career? Will you achieve your professional aspirations solely by working hard and a bit of good luck? Fiona Beddoes-Jones explores and explains.

Research has shown that when a sample cohort of students were asked to imagine themselves thinking like mathematics professors they achieved significantly higher scores in maths tests than comparative groups who had not been asked to think in that way.

This suggests that when you imagine yourself thinking 'like' someone else, you may indeed think more like them.

The effectiveness of using powerful thinking strategies has long been recognised within the sports world. Coached by sports psychologists, top athletes across all disciplines use thinking strategies such as visualisation, repetitive mental practice and positive mental reinforcement to improve their performance.

These techniques are equally as relevant to you at work, for mentally rehearsing a presentation or a future meeting scenario for example, as they are to the top sports performer.

The difference between mediocre performance and excellence lies in the quality of the thinking done by individuals and teams. Changing working patterns has made the collaboration of teams across hierarchies, functions and nationalities critical to organizational success.

Combined with the increasing complexity of operations at local and global levels, it is now even more important for individuals and teams to develop the thinking strategies by which they can work together effectively.

So how do successful Chief Executives think? Research by Cranfield Business School in the UK has identified that the most effective Chief Executives have a cognitive preference for Strategic Thinking with the flexibility to focus on relevant details as appropriate.

Were they born this way, or did they somehow learn to balance their focus on strategy and operations on their way to the top? Our own research shows that the most effective leaders and managers work hard to develop the cognitive flexibility to use a range of different thinking skills and strategies.

They are 'cognitively fit', better able to employ the most appropriate thinking styles and thinking strategies for the task at hand. They think appropriately and effectively, making good quality decisions, consistently over time.

How can you learn how to do this? In order to develop effective thinking strategies you first need to understand the different ways in which you naturally prefer to think and the effect that this has on how you approach tasks and interactions with colleagues. Thinking styles preferences can be heard in the language that people use and are evident in the behaviours they adopt.



The following two exercises will encourage you to think about differences in the ways people think and behave and the impact this might have on those around them.

To begin to understand your own thinking styles preferences it is useful to consider your cognitive drivers, your cognitive development areas and your cognitive motivational profile.

Your cognitive drivers

These are your highest thinking preferences. They may be so important to you that all other information is filtered through them and will probably include those thinking strategies and types of thinking which you naturally engage in most effectively.



They may sometimes be considered to be your cognitive strengths and will be highly appropriate in certain circumstances, although possibly not in others. Some of them are quite likely to be those defining characteristics that 'get you noticed' at work.

Although your cognitive drivers may sometimes be considered to be your cognitive strengths, in certain situations at work or with certain colleagues, they might also be considered to be disadvantageous.

For example, someone who thinks very quickly might think too quickly for their colleagues. Someone who is very adept at understanding complex issues, might over-complicate them and be unable to explain them simply to others.

A manager who has a high strategic focus might overlook critical details and conversely, someone who thinks in a highly detailed way may lack strategic understanding.

Cognitive development areas

These are those elements of your thinking which tend not to be beneficial to you at work. It is quite likely that your colleagues will notice them and may even consider them to be 'weaknesses' of yours.

If they adversely affect performance, either individually or within a team, they could indeed be considered disadvantageous. It is very rare for someone to have no cognitive development areas.

Paradoxically, our experience shows that if someone's profile indicates too much flexibility they may sometimes become paralysed and take no action. By always being able to see both sides of an argument, they can find it difficult to decide which option to choose.

Your cognitive motivational profiles

This comprises those elements of your thinking that you generally find to be motivating within your working environment. They may be related to your cognitive drivers, although this is not always the case.

Not only are you likely to be highly motivated by them, you are likely to find your working

environment demotivating if they are not present. If you want to increase your satisfaction at work, think about what types of thinking you find energising, enjoyable and motivating and evaluate to what degree your cognitive motivational profile is being fulfilled at work.

Developing Cognitive Flexibility:

Thinking skills exercise 1

Think for a moment about the unique flexibility of thinking skills and strategies required by project managers. They need to hold the strategic overview of the project in their heads whilst paying sufficient attention to critical details.

They need to maintain a positive focus on the goals, targets and objectives of the project whilst at the same time making the appropriate contingency plans to ensure that the project does not fail.

They need to proactively push for the project to fulfil its obligations and meet its key timescales and deliverables whilst at the same time being responsive to changing circumstances.

They need to have the cognitive and behavioural flexibility to juggle the complex and often conflicting demands and requirements of their project team, the client and the project itself. As well as being politically astute, they need the communication skills to engage, motivate and present to project teams, front line staff and the Board.

And they need the flexibility of thinking and behaviour to be able to match organisational culture whilst having the courage to challenge unrealistic expectations. Perhaps this explains why so few excellent project managers exist!

Thinking skills exercise 2

There are recognisable patterns of personality 'types' who think in certain ways. Take Matt for example. Highly competitive and easily bored, Matt is very decisive and always believes that he is right.

He often engages in heated debates with colleagues and although recognised as talented, he has already been labelled as "difficult to manage" due to his challenging attitude. Compare Matt with Sally. Quiet and unassuming, Sally likes to talk things through with colleagues.

She is not particularly decisive and tends to avoid an argument, preferring to reach agreement through consensus. Highly collaborative, she is well-liked by colleagues who know that they can always rely on her to help them out if need be.

As she is always in demand, project managers argue amongst themselves over Sally's availability. What advantages and drawbacks can you identify regarding each of their cognitive profiles? Who would you most like (and dislike) working with? Why is that?

Now that you have considered about some of the different ways of thinking which are relevant at work, here is a route map for becoming more flexible in the thinking styles and cognitive strategies you adopt. ■

The author, Fiona Beddoes-Jones, is Managing Director of The Cognitive Fitness Consultancy and the author of the psychometric instruments Thinking Styles and Cognitive Team Roles. She is a member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and the Association of Business Psychologists <http://www.cognitivefitness.co.uk>