



# I like your thinking

**D**o you feel guilty when you spend time thinking instead of doing? Do you set aside time for thinking? Be honest now. Most of us don't – we're too busy to think in a single-minded, no-interruption way, unless we absolutely have to and that's usually when the deadline is looming.

Not only do we not devote enough time to do our own thinking, we're suspicious of people who are seen to think, however briefly. Hands up those who assume that someone who answers a question quickly is smarter than someone who has to pause to think?

## TIME SLIPS AWAY

How has it come to this? I expect it's a combination of the power of the mighty timesheet, law firm management's obsession with recoverable time and the relentless pursuit of profit. Over time, for those who succumb, we become so action-obsessed that the frantic pressure to produce, produce, produce diminishes our thinking time. And we wonder why we feel bored?

For the past 20 years, we've heard about the toxicity of law firm cultures and the gnashing of teeth grows deafening when it comes to losing the best and brightest lawyers to global management consultancies, private equity firms and, heaven forbid, even government. Most of the places lawyers leave law firms to join have healthy 'thinking' cultures. They invest in research and development, they support industry think tanks, some even have their own, and they actively foster innovation and creativity. Has anyone stopped to consider that the lack of recognition of the value of thinking, and what thinking can produce, may be playing a role in law firm staff and client dissatisfaction?

Let me give you an example: clients want lawyers who understand their business, their industry, their challenges. Clients say they want lawyers who can bring ideas to them, who can keep them ahead of the curve and get them thinking about

opportunities and challenges – early. Clients of every size and shape, and in every sector, also say that the lawyers they really value think conceptually, anticipate and solve problems, cut through the dross and distil issues to the ones that matter.

## LET'S GET CURIOUS

To be this type of proactive, business-savvy lawyer requires more than legal skills – it requires the skills of curiosity, courage and thinking. Curiosity, in particular, is key. Curiosity keeps us exploring new possibilities that can lead to new ideas and improved ways of doing things. Being curious involves asking lots of questions and thinking about what the answers mean.

Think back to when you were a child, or to your own children – it's all questions, questions, questions and often outrageous ideas about what the answers might be. As we grow older, we shed the skill of curiosity – we think we know because we have had so many experiences that we think we have the answers, so we stop questioning. Or, as I found out from research I conducted some years ago, we stop asking questions because we think we should know the answer and we don't ask because we're afraid of looking stupid. After years of this, our curiosity dulls and with it fades one of the best opportunities we have to engage with our clients, colleagues, staff, family and friends.

"The closer to the [computer] screen you get, the less creative you are," observed a colleague many years ago, and she was right. The pressure to produce was dulling my curiosity. Without the luxury of having time to think, to reflect and to just wonder about 'what if' questions, I was losing my creative edge. And without it, my value would diminish – and fast.

## AVOIDING THE VORTEX

My colleague's observation was a wake-up call. If you keep getting sucked into the vortex of the here and now, without allowing time for your curiosity and your creativity to grow, you're likely to

become less valuable year after year, until you're obsolete. Sadly, I have seen this happen to many lawyers. Don't let it happen to you.

Use the following tips to keep your curiosity alive. They could ignite your thinking skills – and who knows what creative ideas will burn within you?

## TIPS TO REKINDLE YOUR CURIOSITY

- Ask people what prompts them to think that way about a particular issue.
- Don't accept the first idea you come up with – keep investigating. The earliest ideas are usually not the best, so keep challenging yourself.

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- Be courageous about asking naive questions – in fact, stop making assumptions about their naivety in the first place.
- Think about things from different perspectives – you know your own, so try to think about it from the perspective of others.
- Read, read, read – widely and not just for pleasure. Read to challenge your thinking and then think why that is.

If you use these tips with your clients and your colleagues, I guarantee you will gain valuable insights and stimulate your thinking, making you the type of lawyer clients rave about. ●

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