

## THE \$400 MILLION HIKE



The route to success is a "thinking path" that highlights confidence and clarity.

Recently a team of senior managers faced the question of what it would take for them to achieve their dream, the dream of sparking outstanding results at their company.

For them, accomplishment has a tangible ring. Today their business is worth about \$50 million; the value in five year's time could be as much as \$400 million. For each of them, on average, that delta is worth about \$20 million. But dollars are merely the common denominator of success, for these managers are even more committed to helping clients create sustainable value, building deep and lasting relationships, acting with integrity, enjoying work, sustaining a positive, collegial tone, attracting and keeping talented people, and creating innovative, productive services. Isn't that what we all want? It's what our common sense tells us work should be all about. To these leaders, all of this is entirely obvious. What is not obvious is how to make tangible progress. They recall too many meetings and too little accomplishment. It's not the mountaintop, but the path leading to it, that is obscured by fog.

We can think of this mountain trail as the "thinking path." "Thinking" because our lives are created by our thoughts. "Path" because we have the ability to direct our thinking in the same way that an experienced mountain guide leads his party into the wilderness, heading in a general direction, taking one step at a time, doing the obvious, anticipating the unexpected, looking ahead, relying on gut instinct.

What distinguishes the veteran guide from the novice hiker is not so much physical conditioning or technique as it is mental conditioning, mental conditioning in the sense that the expert guide knows how to use thought more productively.

One sees a similar distinction between skillful leaders and newly minted managers. Just as inexperienced hikers worry about forgetting to take essential equipment in their backpacks, recently promoted managers are apt to be more concerned with analyzing, planning, or questioning than with actually taking action. By contrast, veteran leaders focus on the outcome and let the results guide their preparation. Their clarity about the outcome dictates swift and sure action. They waste little energy on non-essential effort.

It can be comical to watch apprentice leaders at work. So often caution marks their actions. Instead of going for the win, they play not to lose. It is as if they need to know the score before they can throw themselves wholeheartedly into the game. In truth, veteran leaders are not more certain of victory, but they understand that questions

like "Will we win the proposal?" or "Can we make our numbers for the quarter?" are mostly annoying distractions. What matters to them is acting, based on feelings of confidence that come from the mental attitude of "Of course we are playing to win, so lets just get on with it."

The old hand is eager to break camp and get on the trail. Who knows what surprises and beauty the day holds? In contrast, the greenhorn manager has trouble turning away from his computer screen filled with emails or won't adjourn a meeting even though the essential actions have obviously been completed. He enjoys the comfort and safety of staying close to home, while the guide is more at ease walking the path. The trail master doesn't want to waste the day puttering around camp. The same is true of the accomplished leader. He has the mental courage to step into the unknown and discover the unexpected by walking around the plant, visiting the customer, talking to the staff. That is where he learns what needs to be done.

From direct observation he sustains progress and discovers fresh solutions. Have you ever watched experts at work? Their movements are spare, economical, graceful, simple, focused, with no wasted motion. They know what is important and concentrate on doing just that. In contrast, the amateur is often a beehive of activity, all motion, big clouds of dust. It's so easy, as a newly minted manager, to respond to everything with equal urgency, that flagged email from the admin person, that priority voice mail, that staffer who runs down the hall calling your name, that crises of the day precipitated by the boss's bad mood. But at the end of the day does any of this effort matter? Has progress toward the vital outcome been achieved? Imagine, instead, the value that arises from concentrating on doing what is truly important. We all know what matters, so why don't we simply direct our thinking towards that and let the rest take care of itself?

Using our powers of thought as the master does is never hard. Once we see how to do it for ourselves it is like a riding a bike. We string together natural movements that do not require conscious effort, and we feel exhilarated by the wind flowing over our bodies. It is the same when we allow our thinking to flow, one thought after another. Like the rider who wants to turn in a certain direction, we can choose which thoughts to act on and which to ignore. It is just that easy.

Feelings are the signposts that tell us what "thinking path" we are on, headed for the top or wandering in the forest below.

Consider the mood that so often arises when we are concerned about figuring out something via analysis. Doesn't it often feel like a big muddle? Compare that to the deep satisfaction, almost pleasure, that comes from making steady progress towards an outcome, or to the sense of spontaneity that arises when we merely take action towards a goal instead of worrying about what to do next. Or compare it to the fear of failure we feel when we play not to lose. It's hard not to be timid when we work with this mindset. When we play to win, aren't we more apt to be thrilled simply by the fact that we are playing our best irrespective of the final score? All great athletes know this.

The sense of security that came from clinging to our mother's skirt was appropriate when we were children, but as adults the false security that comes from "being close to home all day" enervates our spirit. In contrast when we are pushing against the boundaries, stepping into the unknown, we feel engaged, curious, and enthusiastic. Life is interesting. It's fun to do something new, even if we fall down occasionally.

When we are in the midst of responding to every urgency, we find ourselves frazzled, distracted, worn out, exhausted. These are clues that our thinking is off base, that we need to look towards what must be done and concentrate on just doing it. Such focused actions provoke the wonderment of being liberated from thinking habits that cloud our judgment, cause us to second guess ourselves, stress us out, create needless anxiety, and paralyze us via too much analysis.

Experienced guides rely on trail markers pointing towards the mountaintop. They pay attention to their moods, seeking clues to the quality of their thought processes. The same is true of graceful leaders. When they are feeling fuzzy, they ask themselves, "Where does clarity lie?" When they are feeling insecure, they turn their mind towards confidence by not dwelling on whatever it is that is making them fearful. When they feel the need for a security blanket, they reach within themselves for the courage that comes from knowing we are "just making it up anyway." And when they notice themselves rushing about, they stop to reflect on the question, "What is truly important at this moment?"

Our awareness that we are the thinkers, that we have the power to guide our thought processes, and that our feelings are the guideposts helping us keep our mental energy on the right path is all any of us need to accomplish great deeds. Who knows, maybe the client's \$400 million goal is just the mountaintop they can see from the valley as they start out.

Sharp, like the razors edge, the sages say  
Is the path to enlightenment.

The Dharmapada

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