



On why all managers need to repeatedly ask themselves and others

“What were they thinking?”
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Are All of Us (including me) Really Thinking?

Recently, I bought a new coffee maker. Naturally, being a meticulous guy, I opened the instruction book and began to read.

Under “important safeguards,” instruction #3 told me: “To protect against the risk of electric shock, do not put motor body of blender in water or other liquids.” What? I thought I bought a coffee pot, not a blender.

Still, instruction #3—whether for a blender or a coffee pot—did make sense. Putting any electrical appliance in water is a dumb idea. Didn’t your mother teach you that?

When I got to instruction #20, I was told: “Do not operate your appliance in an appliance garage.” Huh?

Quickly, however, I figured out that by “garage,” the manufacturer meant a “cabinet” in my kitchen.

Even more quickly, I figured out that the instructions were first written in a language other than English. And whoever proofed the translation of the instructions (assuming that a human did proof them) was also not a native English speaker.

What was the firm that sold me this coffee maker thinking? If this is the quality of its instructions (which ought to be easy and cheap to produce), what is the quality of their coffee pot, or blender, or whatever I buy for my appliance garage.

The question isn’t what the firm’s CEO was thinking. The CEO neither wrote nor proofed the instruction book. Nevertheless, he or she clearly has the responsibility to ensure that everyone involved in the design, production, and marketing of the coffee maker is thinking—really thinking.

Here, at least two people were not. First, the person who translated the instructions was not thinking—or was not capable of thinking in English. Second, the manager responsible for coffee-pot instructions—and thus the people who wrote, translated, and proofed the instructions—had not bothered to think either. This manager had not even bothered to read.

In my youth, I collected baseball cards. These days, I collect examples of organizations and their managers who don’t think—don’t *really* think. They are much easier to find than a 1947 Jackie Robinson rookie card.

For example, at a recent conference, participants were given a name tag. It was placed inside a plastic garage at the end of a lanyard which hung around your neck. To learn someone’s name, you had to stare at his or her navel. Not very polite.

And even then, you had no more than a 50 percent chance of learning the person’s name. For while one side of the name tag displayed the name, the other side was blank.

Several years ago, a small cabal of us who regularly attend this conference convinced its administrative staff to print the participants’ names on *both* sides of the name tag.

In my youth, I collected baseball cards. These days, I collect examples of organizations whose managers don’t think, who don’t really think about what they are doing. They are much easier to find than a 1947 Jackie Robinson rookie baseball card.

This would seem to be a simple and obvious “innovation.” How difficult is it to recognize the value of increasing the probability of learning someone’s name from 45% to maybe 90% or even 95% (assuming that some participants always lose or forget their name tag)? Indeed, another member of our original cabal quickly noticed the relapse.

Yet how difficult is it to implement this “innovation”? Do no firms produce printers that can print on both sides of a name-tag card?

There must be some National Association of Conference Managers that has established a firm rule: “Do not waste ink by printing participants’

names on both sides of the name tag.”

A few years ago, I bought a new car which obviously contains multiple computers. One will beep and post a warning on a dashboard screen complete with a snowflake icon: “Roads may be icy. Take care while driving.” This could be helpful. Except, when this warning appears, the road is often dry, the temperature is 37° or 39°, and the sun is shining.

I also get a beep if I have driven 200 miles without stopping. When my car beeps at me, I assume that it is telling me that something is very wrong. Of course, when I get this beep, I’m driving in traffic at 65 miles per hour. How else could I manage to drive 200 miles without stopping? So figuring out what is wrong by searching my dashboard is very dangerous.

The failure of people to think is not a government problem. It is a large-organization problem. It plagues any organization large enough to need a hierarchy to manage its multiple tasks, activities, and processes.

Most public sector executives—such as a town’s superintendent of education, or the Secretary of Veterans Affairs—cannot as easily, personally, and surreptitiously check on the quality of their organizations’ services, and thus check on whether their people are thinking. In contrast, the top executives of firms that make consumer products, do have a simple way to check whether their managers are thinking: Just buy their product directly from a retail outlet and use it.

For all organizations, the chief executive (and middle managers too) need to constantly ask: “Are all of us (including me) really thinking?” **B**

Robert D. Behn, a lecturer at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, chairs the executive-education program “Driving Government Performance: Leadership Strategies that Produce Results.” His book, *The PerformanceStat Potential*, has been published by Brookings.