

## AWAKENING FROM A COGNITIVE SLUMBER

As I start swirling, arranging, structuring my thoughts to write this, my mind drifts away to remind me of Sorites Paradox<sup>1</sup>, an ancient Greek parable which talks about the effect of one minor action repeated over time. I close my eyes and feel the heat of the blazing summer sun, it's light shining through my eyelid as I try to navigate through my mind castle.

What am I looking for, I ask myself before immersing into a state of deep thought. Time to pilot a journey spread across 22 years. An educational journey of 22 years to be precise.

My life unfolds as I walk through the enormous rooms of this castle. Some empty, some partially empty and some brimming with wisdom. Empty rooms for the future I am speculating. I rest my shoulder on a cold stone wall and feel the sweat trickling down my face. As I start my journey through these rooms, I see them all labelled in a bold italic script: '**Class I**', '**Class II**', '**Class III**' and so on. They are all there. Within these rooms, I look around and find blocks named 'My Reading List', and some others named 'Unknown words', 'Learnings from Chapter IV'. I hurriedly check through all my rooms to look for a canister named 'Questions to Ask'. Although I find this canister placed in some of my initial classrooms, I notice a pattern. A pattern of decreasing volume in the canister. I find it amply filled and then scarcely filled by the time I reach the room 'Class IX'. As I enter a cerulean painted room, as grand as a ballroom, labelled 'Class X', I don't find the canister. I refuse to believe and I start looking again. I enter my high school rooms, then my graduation rooms, and finally my masters' room. The grandest of all. To my relief, I find the canister sitting in the corner of this elaborately carved modern room.

A loud, cacophonous screech on-road brings me back to my attention. I sit there in shock and despair thinking about my recent discovery. As I look at the road, a long concrete strip bleached by the blotches of fire made by the sun, I ask myself, 'Why had I stopped asking questions? Why did I entrust everything that was fed to me?' Because of seniority or because he (Professor) came across as a person who was full of wisdom? Or because I was too shy to ask, too afraid of my question being too silly for the class! What could it be? The answer lied in the mainspring of the modern education system: Information Burthen, A Sprint of Numbers (as I call them) and Education Milieu.

---

<sup>1</sup> Clear, James. 2018. *Atomic Habits*.

## Information Burthen

I remember information being thrown at me at a greater speed than I could imbibe. The speed compounded as I moved through my classes. By the time I reached the end of my school life, I wanted to become a passive hoarder of knowledge instead of an active learner. The current plot of information presence makes a man's mind lazy. Lazy to think. Every day our brain is exposed to a dense stream of data and information that because of its intensiveness, swiftness, and aggressiveness, is a challenge to our cognitive abilities. A challenge that we often cannot endure.<sup>2</sup> It turns out that Aristotle was not inaccurate when he wrote: "All men desire to know" in his *Metaphysics*. Today, given the experience of the pop-culture we could squarely pair this insightful assertion with: "...and get distracted".<sup>3</sup> So, instead of being a boon, too much information acts as a bane.

## A Sprint of Numbers

Babies are weighed the moment they blink into the world. Students are graded on every academic level. Companies are scrutinized basis the productivity of their employees. Countries on their GDP. Measurements infiltrate life and society in every form.<sup>4</sup> While numbers help in quantifying and measuring, they seldom emphasize on the *modus operandi*. Once a person is trapped in a number race, he [or she] overlooks the importance of learning along the way. Ergo, a child would rather memorize a concept than understand it to bring home test score numbers that will make his parents happy. Here is another loss of ability to ask questions and think critically. In our data-driven world, we are inclined to overvalue numbers and undervalue anything that is ephemeral, transient, soft, and difficult to quantify (hence, measure). We erroneously think the factors we can measure are the only factors that exist.<sup>5</sup>

## Education Milieu

We primarily learn from our parents and our professors. In other words, we learn from embodiments of authority, and when receiving alleged facts and knowledge from sources that we consider to be authoritative; we tend not to challenge them. When we stop challenging the information that is thrown at us, we mindlessly accept it. This continues through our lifetime. We keep accepting information instead of validating it.

---

<sup>2</sup> Muraszkievicz, Mieczysław. 2014. "An Essay on Information Overload." *Theses, research, materials*, May 12: 7-18.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Steffen, Mau. 2019. *The Metric Society*.

<sup>5</sup> Clear, James. 2018. *Atomic Habits*.

As I ruminate over these problems of 21<sup>st</sup>-century which made me lose my ability to think critically, I think of the jar that I found in my MBA ballroom.

I ponder over how I developed this ability again and my memory takes me back to the day I decided to apply for my dream job. A role in a management consultancy firm. As I scrolled through their website to find the section 'What do we look for in a candidate?', I stumbled across these 4 pillars.<sup>6</sup> The first one was Personal Impact which was described as developing and implementing sound recommendations with the involvement and support of many individuals. The next one was Entrepreneurial Drive which meant the individual to be innovative by nature, always creating new approaches, products, services, and technologies. The third was Problem Solving Skills which was defined as helping clients solve tough problems practically with the help of strong intellectual abilities and rigour. Finally, the last one was on Leadership Abilities - Leading themselves, their teams, and their communities, and fostering effective teamwork to drive results.

Now, let's make a deep dive to understand how I worked to wire myself for months to gain the abilities noted above. For the context of this particular topic, let us discuss about Problem solving skills and leadership abilities. Although one need not ignore personal impact and entrepreneurial skills which are as utile as the others.

#### Asking the right questions is the first step for critical thinking

Critical thinking is careful, goal-oriented thinking. And a process of critical thinking cannot happen without asking the right questions. Hence, Drucker always remained a questioner and his teaching method was also Socratic.<sup>7</sup> The cycle of my thoughts now looks something like this

Define, Specify, Decide, **Act**;

**Act**, Observe, Think, Reflect

Start with recognizing the type of problem or as Drucker says 'Classify the problem'.<sup>8</sup> Identify whether what you're solving is an issue or a ramification of an underlying issue. Formulate a problem statement. Define and redefine the problem statement engaging with various

---

<sup>6</sup> McKinsey and Co. n.d. *McKinsey Careers*. Accessed May 15, 2020. <https://www.mckinsey.com/careers/interviewing>.

<sup>7</sup> Hoefle, Manfred J. n.d. *Managerism Insight*. Accessed May 5, 2020. <https://www.managerism.org/topics/managerism/insights-no-8>.

<sup>8</sup> Drucker, Peter. 1967. "Harvard Business Review." *The Effective Decision*. January. <https://hbr.org/1967/01/the-effective-decision>.

definitions of the problem. A problem statement should address questions of how, who, what, why, where, and when (5Ws and H). A good problem statement should be devoid of ambiguity and should be concise. Then, collect Information & always cross- verify it. Continue asking specific questions until you have received all the information. You may have readymade reports to give you all the data but you should always follow Genchi Genbutsu<sup>9</sup> ('Go and see for yourself' technique to validate the data). Make the decision after a thorough consideration of all imaginable scenarios. Treat implementation as a task requiring responsibility and accountability. Become a learning individual or organization. Practice Hansei (Relentless Reflection) and Kaizen (Continuous Improvement).<sup>10</sup>

---

*Food for thought: 3 men are sitting on a table. One of them decides to leave. How many are left and why is this important? \**

---

The number of faulty decisions made in the past by leaders who were *assumed* to be critical thinkers - politicians, industry executives and government leaders- is a tacit evidence of the general lack of critical thinking skills in that genera (Assumed, being the keyword here).

### **Redefining Pedagogy to cultivate critical thinking – For the society**

Dewey defines Education as “reconstruction and or reorganization of experience which adds meaning to the experience and which increases [one’s] ability to direct the course of subsequent experience”.<sup>11</sup> The process of reconstruction and reorganization of experience mentioned is nothing but reflection. Educating to reflect should begin in childhood and should be an unending process. The University should adopt a curriculum design which pushes to think instead of memorize. Teachers must be ready to come out of their lazy den of fixed answers and accept every students’ version of reasoning. Active reading, free discussions, analytical writing, dynamic assessments should be encouraged instead of a rigid textbook-answers process. An environment for students to ask even the dumbest of their questions should be crafted. Classroom experience should be sated with a creative flow of ideas and should be a profitable learning experience for both student and teacher. Just like I defined an experience for a classroom, a similar environment should exist between executives and

---

<sup>9</sup> Liker, Jeffrey. 2004. *The Toyota Way*. McGraw Hill Education.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 237-250.

<sup>11</sup> Dewey, John. 1938. *Experience and Education*. Kappa Delta Pi.

\*3 Men are left. Deciding an action does not guarantee its implementation.

managers. Leaders need to provide a safe space that is empathetic and unprejudiced for a dialogue to happen.

A Dewey Drucker Redux of sorts.

### Self-assessment is the first action for Leadership

I looked up for the real definition of leadership and soon realised oodles of philosophers and gurus had spoken about it but never quite agreed on one definition.<sup>12</sup> However, I realised that Leadership was about committing to mastery over all you do. A leader must be visionary and must be able to convert his vision into specific and actionable goals. Drucker mentions that “self-assessment is the first action required of leadership”.<sup>13</sup> Self-assessment calls for action instead of just providing a theoretical framework to define leadership. Drucker also exclaims that Leadership is accountable, accountable to understand the state and nature of the being and to produce meaningful results. The loop of self-assessment should be interminable, with constant refining, refocusing and resharpening of goals. In an organization, leadership must be decentralized and dispersed, it should consist of creating multiple feedback loops.<sup>14</sup>

How do we do all this should be the next logical question. So, the first step would be to believe that ‘Nothing may be so deceptive as an “obvious fact”.’ We must initiate truth verification by making an inventory of our assumptions, then refining them into their smallest components- their premises, or arguments. What appears to be true often is deceptive, for what is accepted as true by one person may be rejected by another. Truth is an agreement with reality. If it is anything apart from that, it should be False.

Historically, western managers have been crisis managers, much of their time is dedicated to finding temporary solutions. Such kind of vertical, isolated, temporary goal-oriented thinking is devoid of the consideration tangential potentialities and their long-term effects.<sup>15</sup> The West has prioritized logic and reason over emotions and the East has dominated by placing optimum emphasis on mind and heart, thereby laying a foundation for an integrated and holistic perspective. In order to develop this holistic approach, the East has concentrated on

---

<sup>12</sup> McVey, R Steve. 1995. "Critical Thinking Skills for Leadership Development." *Journal of Leadership Studies; Flint* (Sage Publications Ltd.) 2 (4): 86-97.

<sup>13</sup> Hesselbein, Frances, Joan Kuhl, and Peter Drucker. 2009. *Peter Drucker's Five Most Important Questions: Enduring Wisdom for Today's Leaders*.

<sup>14</sup> Semetsky, Inna. 2010. "Ecoliteracy and Dewey's educational philosophy: implications for future leaders." *Foresight : the Journal of Futures Studies, Strategic Thinking and Policy; Bradford* (Emerald Group Publishing Limited) 12 (1): 31-44.

<sup>15</sup> McVey, *supra* note 10.

Mindfulness, Active listening, and Objective analysis.<sup>16</sup> In today's VUCA world\*\*, it is necessary to develop a lateral thinking process instead of a vertical thinking process. Lateral thinking is more eclectic. Instead of taking the most direct route to achievement of an immediate goal, lateral thinking requires to identify all possible alternatives of action and implications of each alternative to be identified from a strategic perspective.<sup>17</sup> The richness of lateral thinking brings forth creativity and pushes for innovation. A teaching method in leadership development that can reach beyond knowledge and is amenable to the development of critical thinking is the case method, real or hypothetical. Defining a hypothesis and testing it with real life circumstances. Both the topics discussed above are not MECE.\*\*\* There is in fact more and more overlap between critical thinking and its integration with leadership development. A person is not merely born with these skills, it takes the cumulative effect of education, mentors and real-life experiences to develop these skills.

### Closing Cogitation

If I wasn't exposed to this necessary skill while applying for my dream role, (I have secured the job now, Hurray!!), I don't know how many years it would have taken for me to realise my lost ability of asking significant questions. So, if I can dare to relearn something as rudimentary as my thinking process. Then, I am sure anyone can. So, the only question that remains is 'when' you do it. I would leave you with a thought here that be a product of your decisions instead of being a product of your circumstance (I was most certainly the latter). A last thought that remains in my head is that Learning remains a desideratum for any leader. So, then be it lessons for critical thinking or personal impact. Jack Welch said "Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others.". But I would tweak this a little and put forward a thought I believe in "Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing *yourself* and others". An insatiable hunger to make a cosmic impact on people and help them in their exclusive journey makes me write my experiences with 'critical thinking'. So now tell me when you are going to rummage through your memory archives looking for your cannister!!

---

<sup>16</sup> Sharma, Piyush, and Marshall Goldsmith. 2020. *Leadership coaching: The East-West perspective*. 04 21. Accessed 05 06, 2020. <https://www.fortuneindia.com/opinion/leadership-coaching-the-east-west-perspective/104495>.

\*\* VUCA: Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity

<sup>17</sup> McVey, *supra* note 10.

\*\*\*MECE: Mutually Exclusive, Collectively Exhaustive; A concept developed by Barabara Minto