

Using the Thinking Styles[®] instrument in coaching

'The world we have created is a product of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking.'
Albert Einstein

COACHING IS A cognitively complex activity and the main focus of coaching is behavioural change. Understanding one's thinking strategies is a pre-requisite to change and is, therefore, the starting point for all cognitive coaching interventions and subsequent behavioural change.

It is our role as coaches to enable our coachees to develop the cognitive flexibility to enable a multi-perspective approach which we believe is one of the critical factors for self-management and efficacy within the workplace.

This article considers a cognitive approach to coaching through the use of the occupational psychometric; Thinking Styles. Using Thinking Styles will help coachees to understand the implications that their cognitive preferences have for themselves and for others and the instrument can also be used to measure how someone's thinking has changed over time.

Background to the Thinking Styles model

The concept for Thinking Styles originated from Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), which was originally developed as a behavioural model or 'system of thought', suggesting that we all organise, edit and construct our own individual models of the world from the information that we receive via our senses, (Jacobson, 1996). Understanding how we have encoded our subjective experience is fundamental to developing our self-awareness and is critical to the subsequent self-management of any change.

Thinking Styles measures some of the 'meta-programmes' of NLP; those preferences or filters that drive our mental processes, influencing the ways in which our experiences are sorted and represented internally. Leslie Cameron-Bandler (1985), suggests that the words we use are not randomly selected, but have specific meanings for us. Of course, initially

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as a coach we only have conjecture about these preferences, and the coach needs to explore their theories with their coachee in more detail. However, we have powerful linguistic clues and no good coach should ignore these clues.

Within occupational psychology, the concept of measurable cognitive filters called cognitive styles also exists. Messick (1976), defines cognitive style preference as, *'Differences in preferred ways of organising and processing information and experience.'* Beddoes-Jones (2003), defines cognitive style as, *'Differences and similarities in the ways people think, some of which are habitual preferences and some of which may be actively disliked.'* Thinking Styles is, therefore, a measure of cognitive style preference.

The Thinking Styles model

Thinking Styles was developed using the procedure for psychometric test development recommended by Kline (2000). It comprises 169-item statements and uses a six-point Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree' with a 'Sometimes Agree' option which we included to identify a cognitive flexibility response.

The 26 dimensions are sub-divided into a Sensory, People and Task focus. The Sensory focus identifies the ways individuals prefer to receive and process information via the senses. The People focus identifies how individuals tend to interact with other people while the Task focus dimensions relate to tasks and activities and how individuals approach problem solving.

Thinking Styles generates an 'intelligent report', i.e. its content is derived from someone's specific responses to the questionnaire.

Therefore, no two reports will ever be identical. Firstly, 'Personal Preferences' are identified. These measure the degree to which someone has identified that they like, or dislike, thinking in certain ways. Secondly, these personal preferences are compared against a normalised UK Managerial Sample. Thirdly, the personal preferences are listed in Rank Order with highest preferences first and lowest preferences at the bottom of the page.

Next there are 12 'Mini-Profiles' which really bring the implications of someone's Thinking Styles preferences to life. These are 'Thinking Styles in Action' and are listed in Table 1.

Using Thinking Styles with Coachees

With a behavioural approach, the coach will focus on the manifested behaviours and will ignore the thinking that has generated them. As we have already said, taking a cognitive approach to coaching is more integrative because of its connections to a coachee's underlying cognitive motivational drivers and their values. Therefore, a cognitive approach gives the coach more depth of understanding than simply taking a behavioural approach.

As Thinking Styles is a measure of 'preference', there are no right or wrong answers and, therefore, no profiles are inherently 'better' than any others. There are, however, implications and consequences of someone's Thinking Styles preferences. For example, a leader whose highest preferences are all task focused may come across as being quite emotionally cool and relatively unconcerned about the people aspects of their role. Therefore, one of the implications of a cognitive profile such as this could be that the leader may find it difficult to engage the hearts and minds of the people they lead. Because Thinking Styles lists people's personal preferences in rank order, a predominantly People or Task focus is quite easy to identify. Our experience of coaching leaders and senior executives is that very often they are completely unaware of the impact that their profile can have on their own people or their colleagues.

So how would we suggest that a coach uses the Thinking Styles questionnaire to make a cognitive coaching intervention? In preparation, the coach would start by reviewing the questionnaire noting any responses that they think are unusual or any questions the coachee have 'Disagreed' to as these could indicate a dislike of a particular mode of thinking. Where they have used the

'Sometimes' response, make a note to explore where they would engage in a particular type of thinking activity and where they wouldn't. If the coachee has been 'Unable to Answer' any questions it's useful to explore why this is.

Then, using the report, the coach will review the Personal Preference Scores noting any high and low preferences, particularly where any significant 'Dislike' scores are indicated. In our experience, people's highest preferences are often linked to the type of thinking and behaviour which they value most in the workplace. It's very important, therefore, to pay particular attention to your coachees' top ten preferences as this will indicate the type of person that they are at work and the face that they present to colleagues.

As none of the Thinking Styles operate in isolation coaches will find that coachees will link them together in many different ways to generate personal strategies for themselves. Some of these strategies will work well for them and others may not be so successful. By probing and asking the right kind of questions, you will be able to help them understand their current strategies and assist them to develop new, more appropriate strategies if they need to.

Next, have a look at their Comparative (STEN) Scores. As colleagues tend to notice our particular high and low preferences, it is likely that higher than average scores may be perceived as cognitive strengths and lower than average scores, therefore, may be perceived as potential 'weaknesses' of thinking.

Exploring your coachee's 12 Mini-Profiles which link the Thinking Styles together, can usefully identify some of the implications that your coachee's cognitive profile has in certain areas of their working lives. As each mini-profile only comprises a maximum of five bullet points, they are only designed to be 'starters for 10'. In other words, there will be many other implications for them of their profile that you can tease out of their responses. The bullet points just give you a useful basis for beginning your discussions.

Thinking Styles can be used a second time as a retest tool when you near the end of your coaching programme. Feedback from our own coachees suggests that they get just as much value from an opportunity to review their (often altered) profile as they did from the first in depth facilitated feedback session. In fact, because they have now been 'primed' to review

Table 1: Thinking Styles in action.

1. Your Cognitive Drivers	2. Your Cognitive Development Areas
3. Your Motivational Profile	4. Your Analysis and Decision Making Profile
5. Your Style as a Manager	6. How to Manage You
7. Your Communication Profile	8. Your Preferred Presentation Style
9. Your Leadership Profile	10. Your Contribution to a Team
11. How to Influence You	12. Your Change Management Profile

their own thinking, many report that the second time was even more valuable than the first as they are better able to bring their recent experiences to mind.

Let us consider one example. The ability to be flexible regarding Simplicity and Complexity thinking are very important within a leadership role. High Complexity thinkers, although often able to appreciate multi-perspectives, can over-complicate things making their strategies difficult to implement. High Simplicity thinkers, although easier to follow, may miss critical connections and run the danger of being labelled as naïve and simplistic thinkers by colleagues. It is your role as a coach to encourage and support your coachees in developing their abilities to use both types of thinking as and when each would be most appropriate, regardless of their initial personal preferences. This is, therefore, a good example of where the flexibility of thinking we mentioned earlier combines to create what we would describe as 'cognitive fitness' within a leader.

As a psychometric tool that explores how cognitive preferences relate to motivation, values and consequent behaviours, within a coaching context, Thinking Styles can offer leaders for example, unique insights into their cognitive and behavioural patterns which, in effect, make them who they are. This idea links directly to the concept of 'Authentic Leadership'. The term was originated by Bill George (2003, 2007), who suggests that for any individual to be truly effective they must be willing to work hard at developing themselves in order to acquire genuine self-awareness, an understanding which we would suggest allows people to become more congruent and consistent within their day-to-day lives.

Summary

The main focus of coaching is behavioural change. Understanding one's thinking strategies is a pre-requisite to changing them and is therefore the starting point for all cognitive coaching interventions and subsequent behavioural change.

Using Thinking Styles will help coachees to understand the implications that their cognitive preferences have for themselves and for others and the instrument can also be used to measure how someone's thinking has changed over time.

Developing a cognitively flexible approach and being able to take a multi-perspective approach is critical for effective leadership. Thinking Styles offers leaders unique insights into their cognitive and behavioural patterns and the impact that these have on those they are leading.

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