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Principle 10: Think Accurately

Controlled Habits

Think of your mind as a piece of land. Through diligent, planned work, it can be cultivated into a beautiful and productive garden. Or it can lie fallow, overrun by weeds sprouting from seed carried by passing birds and the wind.

Harvesting the bounty of your mind depends on careful effort and preparation by you, the gardener. This organization and its successful implementation are the result of accurate thinking. All plans, purpose, and achievements are created by thought. Your thoughts, you have already learned, are the only thing over which you have complete control. You can use them wisely or unwisely, but however you do it, your thoughts have power.

The Raw Power of Thought

An unknown paperhanger used thought powerfully. He sat moodily in a prison cell, contemplating the fact that life offered some people power and riches, while he was confined for a time. His very act of thought changed his life. The next the world heard of this man, he had written a book in which he frankly revealed the purposes of his mind and put the world on notice of his specific goal in life. Some people read the book and smiled tolerantly; others didn't even bother since they thought it was the work of a lunatic. A little more than a decade later this madman had half of Europe under his heel and the other half frightened out of its wits and fighting for dear life. His actions were setting the world on fire, but people in America went complacently about their business, believing that the fire would burn itself out.

Adolf Hitler found the opportunity to use his power so destructively because so many other people failed to use theirs constructively. Although his thinking was not accurate in the sense that you will come to understand, it still had the power to cause death and suffering for countless millions of innocent people. His thoughts were abominations, but they had force.

Applied accurate thinking is crucial to your desire for success, but you should also recognize that exercising it is a moral duty you owe to every other person in the world.

The Focused Power of Accurate Thought

Every story you have read in this book about a successful person proves the benefits--individual and social--of accurate thought harnessed to a worthy definite purpose.

The rigor of Jonas Salk's thinking discovered the vaccine which prevents polio.

George C. Marshall's careful planning revitalized Europe economically after the effects of Hitler's inhuman atrocities. George Bush's methodical assembly of the Desert Storm alliance and the detailed planning of generals like Norman Schwarzkopf and Colin Powell put a stop to Saddam Hussein's Hitler-like ambitions. The quiet diligence that Mother Clara Hale put into building Harlem's Hale House now provides love and care to children ravaged by their parents' addiction to drugs and infection with AIDS. None of these great things could ever have happened without accurate thinking. You can never achieve anything great without learning to think accurately.

The Thinking Process

Accurate thinking is based on two types of reasoning:

1. Induction. This is the act of reasoning from a part to a whole, from the particular to the general, from the individual to the universal. It is based on experience and experimentation and draws conclusions from them.
2. Deduction. In this act of reasoning specific conclusions are based on general logical assumptions.

The two types of reasoning are very different, but they can work together. For instance, suppose that every time you throw a rock at a window, the window breaks while the rock remains unchanged. The results of your repeated efforts cause you to reason inductively that the glass is fragile and that the rock is not. From this inductive reasoning, you can then proceed to deductive reasoning, which would suggest to you, among other things, that another non-fragile object--a baseball, for example--would also break the glass or that the rock might also penetrate other fragile things like paper.

Of course, your reasoning in this case would be limited since you have not accounted for many variables. A fragile object could also break the window (certainly a bottle could), and some fragile objects like cloth might simply collapse about a thrown rock instead of breaking. I'm sure you can think of many other contingencies which would apply in this case. This example shows how easy it is to make false conclusions and why accurate thinking is important and why your reasoning must be rigorous. You must examine the results of your reasoning consistently and look for flaws. You should apply this process just as stringently to the thinking of other people.

To be an accurate thinker, you must take two important steps:

- Separate facts from opinions, fictions, unproved hypotheses, and hearsay.
- Separate facts into two categories: important and unimportant.

Everyone except accurate thinkers has an overabundance of opinions, and these are usually worthless. Many of them can be dangerous and destructive, especially when they occur in conjunction with personal initiative. Hitler is an obvious example.

You cannot accept an opinion offered to you unless it is based on facts or sound hypotheses about the facts. You should not offer any opinions except on the same grounds.

Accurate thinkers never act on freely offered opinions without giving them the closest scrutiny; they permit no one to do their thinking for them. They obtain facts, information, and counsel from others, but they retain the right to accept or reject it in whole or in part. Newspapers, gossip, and rumor are unreliable sources from which to procure facts, as the events they cover are so changeable and these particular media are often not subject to verification. Remember the famous headline DEWEY DEFEAT TRUMAN? If you had believed it, you would probably still be wondering why General MacArthur lost his job.

Wishes are often fathers to popularly accepted "facts" since people naturally assume facts to be things that harmonize with their wishes. But these kinds of "facts" are so freely offered that you should remember that real facts generally have a price tag attached—the price of the painstaking labor needed to examine them for accuracy. For a few days not so long ago our nation was in the grip of the rumor that hypodermic needles were appearing in Pepsi cans everywhere. There were reports of incidents from more than twenty states. On the basis of this "fact," the price of Pepsi stock dropped dramatically, and many investors sold Pepsico shares for much less than they had paid for them, even though the company's executives assured the country that this kind of tampering was highly unlikely.

Accurate thinkers recognized the improbability of such a widespread tampering scheme and bought Pepsi stock. Then the FDA and the FBI declared every single report to be a hoax. Who benefited? The panicky sellers who had bought “high” and then prematurely sold a very solid company or the accurate thinkers who bought the stock at a discount price?

Techniques for Evaluation

As an accurate thinker you must scrutinize every bit of information you encounter. You have to realize that some things contain facts while being colored, modified, or exaggerated, either intentionally or carelessly. Any political campaign will demonstrate this point in glorious detail.

You should apply some tests to information you encounter. If you read a book, for example, you should ask questions like these:

1. Is the writer a recognized authority on the subject covered?
2. Did the writer have a motive in writing the book other than imparting accurate information? What is that motive?
3. Does the writer have a profit interest in the subject covered?
4. Is the writer a person of sound judgment or a fanatic?
5. Are there easily accessible sources to check and verify the writer’s statements?
6. Do the writer’s statements harmonize with common sense and experience?

Before you accept anyone’s statements as facts, you must try to find the motive behind those statements. The motive can be completely honorable, but you must still be careful about accepting the statements of overzealous people who have a habit of letting their emotions run wild. Honor alone does not equal accuracy.

You must rely upon your own judgment and be cautious no matter who is trying to influence you. If a statement does not seem reasonable or contradicts your experience, set it aside for further examination.

When you ask others for facts or judgments, try not to disclose the answer you expect or your motives in asking, for people often alter their advice to fit what they assume is their listener’s desire. This process may be innocent or duplicitous, but you should avoid it. Instead of asking, “Do you think it would be possible to send a man to Saturn?” or “How can I send a man to Saturn?” ask, “What do you know about the possibility of sending a man to Saturn?” This example may seem a little absurd, but if you substitute “moon” for “Saturn” in the above sentences, you’ll see evidence of the power of accurate thinking.

The Sources of Your Thought Habits

Your initial thought habits come from two sources, both of them hereditary:

1. Physical heredity. The nature and character of the generations that preceded you have some influence on your thought habits. You may be born with a predominantly rigid or free-floating thinking process, which many scientists now categorize as left or right-brained. The first emphasizes details; the other, broad schemes. Accurate thinking can modify, strengthen, and direct both qualities, since everyone possesses each, even though one is stronger than the other.
2. Social heredity. Your environmental influences, education, and experience all are social stimuli. Thinking is most influenced by these things, and that is dangerous because it means that much of your thinking is inspired by others. However, you can take action to control and select these influences, such as reading this book.

Most people embrace a religion, ally themselves politically, even select the car they drive not because they have given thought to the subject but because of the influences of those nearest them: friends, relatives, and acquaintances.

As an accurate thinker you will accept no political, religious, or other type of thought, regardless of its source, unless and until you have carefully analyzed it. Then you will accept it or reject it of your own free will, and its value to you will be much greater. Robert Taylor, onetime governor of Tennessee, once asked a young man why he was a confirmed Democrat. "Because," the young man exclaimed, "I live in Tennessee, and my father and grandfather are Democrats. That's why!"

"Well," said the governor, "wouldn't you be in a bad fix if your father and grandfather had been horse thieves?" I don't care what your party is, but you must select it, as you select everything, on the basis of accurate thought, not on the habits of others.

Two Big Mistakes

Two opposite qualities are very prevalent in human nature, but each is a major roadblock to accurate thinking. Credulousness--the habit of believing on the basis of little or no evidence--is a major human fault, for it is fatal to accuracy in thinking. This fault--in both his own people and those of the world--certainly let Hitler build his influence to such horrendous levels. The mind of an accurate thinker is an eternal question mark. You must challenge everyone and everything that influences it.

This does not imply a lack of faith. In fact, it is the greatest expression of respect for the Creator since you recognize that your thoughts are the only thing over which you have been given complete control and you embrace this blessing.

The small minority of accurate thinkers has always been the hope of humanity. For they are the pioneers in whatever they do. They create business and industry, advance science and education, and inspire invention and religion. Emerson said it best:

Beware when the great God lets loose a thinker on this planet. Then all things are at risk. It is as when a conflagration has broken out in a great city, and no man knows what is safe or where it will end. There is not a piece of science but its flank may be turned tomorrow; there is not literary reputation, not the so-called eternal names of fame, that may not be revised and condemned. The very hopes of man, the thoughts of his heart, the religion of nations, the manners and morals of mankind, are all at the mercy of a new generalization.

Generalization is always a new influx of the Divinity into the mind. Hence the thrill that attends it. When you are an accurate thinker, you are the master, not the slave, of your emotions. You live among other people without giving them the power to control your thinking. You must always be on guard against the human tendency initially to reject an idea because it is unsound but, by close association with it in the form of family, friends, and coworkers, to endure it, then to embrace it as your own, forgetting its original source and your first evaluation of it. Your mind will absorb any idea that it is repeatedly subjected to, whether good or bad, right or wrong. As an accurate thinker you can make this trait work for you in the sense that whatever you think today becomes what you are tomorrow. This is the essence of the power of a definite major purpose and positive mental attitude.

The other common weakness in most people's thinking is a tendency to disbelieve anything they do not understand. When the Wright brothers announced that they had built a machine that could fly and asked newspaper reporters to come to Kitty Hawk and see for themselves, no one would come. When Guglielmo Marconi revealed that he could send a message through the air without wires, some of his relatives had him sent to a psychiatrist for examination. They were convinced that he had lost his ability to reason.

Contempt prior to examination is a trap that will limit your opportunity, applied faith, enthusiasm, and creativity. Do not confuse a suspension of belief in something unproved with a certainty that anything new is impossible. Accurate thinking is designed to help you understand new ideas or unusual facts, not to keep you from examining them.

Controlled Habits

I have repeatedly emphasized that your thoughts are the only thing over which you can exert complete control. Because your mind is so subject to the dominating influences in your environment, you must take control over those influences by developing beneficial mental habits. This process is called controlled habits.

The process of controlling your habits is miraculous. It translates the power of thought into action. But if your habits are poor or bad, it can bring misery and failure. Your success depends on the strength and quality of your controlled habits.

Think of your mind as photographic film. Film registers any object reflected on it. It does not select the object it records, and it has no control over the focus of the image or the length of the exposure it receives. You, the photographer, select the image, adjust the lens, manipulate the light and shutter speed. The quality of the picture that is taken depends on your skill in controlling all these elements.

For your mental film, the subject of your composition is your definite major purpose. You frame it as you choose, illuminate it with the fire of your burning obsession, and expose your mind to it for the time that you determine.

Few professional photographers take one shot of an important image. They do over the shot, adjusting all the elements of the process slightly, so that a perfect image is finally recorded. Similarly, instead of a single photo session, you will work on your mental image on a daily basis, repeatedly exposing your brain to the image of your definite major purpose. This repeated "photographing" of your definite major purpose then becomes a habit, a controlled habit, since you have consciously decided upon the nature of your actions. The repeated reflection of the light of your burning obsession--which springs from your emotions--will also register this image upon your subconscious, which will work, without your knowledge, to bring the image to fruition by inspiring you, through your imagination, with ideas and plans for attaining your purpose.

The manifestations of these ideas will not simply appear. Your subconscious cannot deposit a new car in your driveway or ten thousand dollars in your bank account. Accurate thinking persistent action in applying these ideas and all the principles of success. This is why I have placed such strong emphasis on daily personal initiative in everything you do, for you must also develop the controlled habit of action.

At first action may require every bit of conscious mental control you can exercise. But every time you act, you strengthen that controlled habit, so that the process becomes more ingrained. Your enthusiasm and your applied faith will also drive you. Both these qualities will increase as you make action a controlled habit.

Work will no longer be drudgery; it will become as pleasurable as eating when you are hungry. Strange things that will give you hope and courage will begin happening. People will begin to cooperate with you in a friendlier spirit and without your asking them to do so.

Unexpected opportunities for attaining your definite major purpose will spring up around you as the result of your action. Your imagination will become keener and more alert. You will work longer with less fatigue. You will see the world in terms of hope and faith because the controlled habit of action has alerted you to their possibility. With these changes will come improvements in every aspect of your life.

Accurate thinking depends heavily on several other principles of success: definiteness of purpose, self-discipline, prompt decision making, and a positive mental attitude. It also plays an important role in the next principle, controlled attention, which will bring even more focus to your efforts toward your definite major purpose.

Think About How You Think

Accurate thinking is one of Napoleon Hill's 17 Principles of Success. He wrote that you should choose what you want to achieve, determine how you will set about achieving it, and move toward that goal with definite, positive awareness.

Here are some "types" of thinking which can be useful in a variety of circumstances, as suggested by Mario Leo in *Business Horizons*.

- Lateral Thinking: Think sideways rather than moving straight to the target. Force yourself to forget what you know about what works in a situation and give new possibilities a fair trial.
- Recursive Thinking: Look for what you are not seeing. Focus on the significance of what is left out of your analysis of a problem.
- Reflexive Thinking: Think about the fact that you are the one doing the thinking. How do your own abilities, experiences, and preferences affect the way you are thinking about the situation?
- Playful Thinking: Enjoy the process of thinking. Keep your thoughts in perspective. Retain the ability to laugh at yourself. Remember that life is larger than business.

Think Big!

In a single issue of an important national publication, there were four separate advertising appeals to capture the interest of serious, ambitious salespeople:

- "THINK BIG!" was the headline of one of the ads. "Here is an opportunity for a salesperson with the ability to think a problem through."
- "You can become tomorrow's big success story" read a bid from one of America's largest corporations.
- "Thinking salespersons wanted" was another call for skills and ambition.
- And "We want three people who know how to think their way to the top" announced another nationwide company.

The similarity in the basic appeal of these four announcements is strikingly impressive. Each one unrolled the red carpet of welcome for people who can think their way to greater sales volume. Why?

The answer probably lies in the fact that some of us in the fascinating, complex selling field "work too hard" and "think too little."

One of my longtime business friends belonged to the so-called "overworked" group. He was one of the busiest salesmen I have ever known. Wherever you saw him he was usually puffing his way from place to place. He was in a hurry. He was a man buried in detail. The rear seat of his automobile was littered with samples, unopened mail, and literature on various products in his lines. Much of this mass of disorganization contained valuable selling ideas that he seldom found time to read.

Recently I visited this man in the hospital. His active selling days are probably at an end, for he literally worked himself to near-death. Yet, from an achievement standpoint, he never quite caught up with the procession in the field of selling. He was too busy running in circles to take time to think.

An advertising and marketing executive who had cashed in on more selling ideas than many of us gave him credit for had learned the art of relaxing and thinking. I walked into his office one balmy afternoon and found him alone. He was seated in his high-back leather swivel chair, facing a large window. From his fourth-floor perch he could look out over the city which he considered to be his great garden of opportunity. His hands were folded on his chest. His head rested on smooth leather. His feet were propped up on the windowsill. He greeted me with a guiltless and friendly smile.

"Sorry to disturb your nap," I quipped. "You act like you have nothing to do. Maybe you should get up and get out and go after more business instead of loafing and dreaming."

He dropped his feet to the floor, sat up straight, and grinned at me.

"I'm about to do just that," he chuckled. "I'm going out there, into that milling mob you can see, and I'm going to wrap up one of the biggest contracts of my career. You thought you caught me loafing, but you were dead wrong. I was working. I was putting a jigsaw together to land one of the juiciest accounts in this city. When you invaded my office, I was engaged in one of those rare activities called thinking. A lot of you salesmen would be better off if you did more of that sort of thing and less running around in circles."

This sales specialist accomplished what he said he would. He signed up that desirable account only a few days after I had "caught him napping." When I heard about his victory, I recalled what he had said about doing more thinking and less running in circles.

Not long ago, a dynamic speaker told a group of salesmen and sales executives that only 5 percent of us think we think, and the rest of us would rather die than think.

Successful salespeople have learned that thinking and work go hand in hand. They have also learned that thinking must be sound and work must be constructive if sales volume is to be the end result.

In a sales conference I attended, one salesman offered a familiar excuse for getting no business from a potential customer whose business was urgently desired by his company. "Nobody can sell to that man," the salesman declared with angry conviction. "Somebody will sell to that man," the sales manager replied with calm conviction, "and I hope it will be you!"

Shaken by the refusal to accept his lame excuse, this salesman resorted to something he had been neglecting. He settled down to serious thinking. He began pulling his difficult prospect apart to find out what made him tick. He jotted down for his own examination some of the foibles, the quirks, the whims, the virtues, and even the cussedness of his difficult prospect. In doing this, the salesman discovered that his own prejudices were fading. He began to see this difficult man in sharper focus. He discovered that this potential customer had ambitions, hopes, aspirations, likes and dislikes, just as any other of his customers had.

The trouble had been that the salesman and his difficult prospect had not been communicating effectively. To level out this avenue of communication, which was due to lack of understanding, the salesman began making calls with a new objective in mind. He tried to sell himself to the prospect by convincing him that he was interested in him and his welfare.

As a result of this new approach, the two men ultimately got to be on friendly terms. They developed confidence in each other and, in due time, the challenge thrown at the salesman by his sales manager paid off -- the salesman accomplished what he had told his sales manager was "impossible." As he returned to the office one afternoon, he wore a warm smile, because tucked away in his briefcase was the fattest order he had ever written.

Sometime after he had scored this victory, I chatted with him over a cup of coffee. "What was the real clincher in making this big sale?" I asked.

"Patience," he replied. "Plus a lot of thinking, planning, and self-examination. But patience was at the bottom of the deal. I had to learn that the hard-to-sell guy can't be shoved into buying. The trick is to toss him a well-thought-out idea that appeals to him. The appeal may be profit, pride, or some other benefit. Give this idea time to soak in. Let him mull over himself. When he starts asking questions, you're on your way."

Thus we see once again how we can think our way to greater sales. We must begin to think about what we are not selling and what we are selling.

For example, we are not selling motorboats or sailboats. What we are selling is adventure.

We are not selling a product that is new to the market. We are selling new opportunities for more profits.

We are not selling advertising space in a newspaper or magazine, or commercial time on TV or radio. We are selling the pulling power of these media to draw more business to our prospects' markets.

We are not selling insurance contracts at lower premiums. We are selling personal, family, or business security and freedom from risk and worry.

We are not selling to either male or female customers the wool or cotton or silk or the synthetic fabric that makes up an article of clothing. We are selling beauty, comfort, pride, prestige, and the admiration of others.

To sell effectively, let us search out the problem that most concerns our prospective customer. Then let us try to offer a solution to that problem.

The only real sales gimmicks that work are creative thinking, hard work, integrity, and faith. So if you want to chalk up big sales records, take time to read, time to relax, time to think, and time to serve others, because these are the activities that will expand your horizons and pay big dividends.

The key word, of course, is think, and when you do your thinking, think BIG!