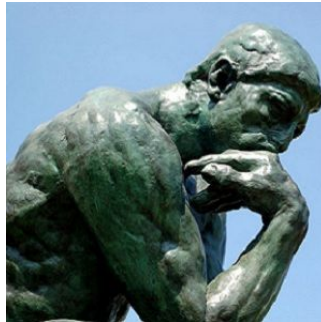


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## Three Steps to Thinking Like a Leader



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Certain desirable skills and attributes can help you become a leader — that's according to competency-based models. But to be an effective leader, you need to adopt a mental model that makes it possible to acquire those skills and demonstrate those attributes/behaviours in the first place, according to Eric J. McNulty, director of research at the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative (NPLI), Harvard School of Public Health.

Leadership thinking can be learned but is difficult to teach, McNulty says. "It is a matter of asking questions and presenting challenges that help someone discover the mental model that enables their 'best leader' to emerge," he explains. "It requires not just competency, but demonstrated proficiency. And proficiency only comes with practice, feedback, and analysis."

His article in *strategy+business* describes "three big mental shifts" that aspiring leaders must make in order to develop thinking capability:

**Shift 1: From linearity to complexity.** Management systems and processes tend to be linear. They assume that similar inputs will result in similar outputs. But as soon as the human element becomes involved, the system becomes both complex and adaptive. It is dynamic — similar inputs may bring about wildly divergent outputs.

Leadership requires a more nuanced view of the world because it involves people: what motivates them, what their interests are, and how engaged they become. As a leader, you need to understand that relationships between the system components are paramount, rather than the components themselves. Discerning these dynamics is essential to achieving your desired outcome, which means you think about connectivity, and the extent and robustness of those connections.

**Shift 2: From "focus" as a noun to "focus" as a verb.** As a leader, you must continually recalibrate to ensure that you have established the right goals and that they not only include financial measures but also purpose (understanding the problem your customer has hired you to help solve) and values (the bedrock principles that guide your activities).

Clarity is a constant challenge, particularly in large organisations with multiple business units. You must balance short- and long-term interests as well as the needs of diverse stakeholders. Each of these can create distortions and distractions. When you gain clarity on purpose, values, and performance, you foster agility throughout the organisation. You enable order without having to control every action and decision.

As you contemplate the outcomes you achieve — for better or worse — ask yourself about clarity. Ask others and accept their honest feedback.

**Shift 3: From they to you.** For too long, individuals have looked to their organisations to tell them how to develop as leaders, and this competency model has dictated the training agenda. While competency models offer the advantages of "clarity, consistency, and connectivity [with other HR processes]," these models have significant limitations because they tend to be complicated, often with 30 to 50 components; conceptual in that they usually are based on a leadership ideal; and are built on current realities rather than future needs.

Also, the models do not fully consider the individuality of each person being pushed through the Play-Doh mould and how that person might make a distinct leadership mark. As a leader, you need to take responsibility for understanding your strengths and weaknesses and discerning where and how you can make your most meaningful leadership contributions. Most important, you must take ownership of your own leadership development.

Source: [strategy+business](#)  
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