

Thought Leadership

It comes from outside and inside.



By Marilyn McLeod and Marshall Goldsmith

Adapted from original published in Ken Shelton's Leadership Excellence Magazine

If you are charged with leadership development, you should be involved in identifying both external and internal thought leaders and their area of expertise, especially as it relates to the big problems and opportunities in your organization this year.

Think of ways to tap their expertise for presentations, coaching, training, and mentoring. Just remember: most thought leaders (whether they are internal or external) are specialists. You can't expect them to add great value outside of their fairly narrow area of expertise.

Start by drawing up a list of potential thought leaders—including their area of expertise, current position, achievements, publications, media coverage to date, and availability. Now, list opportunities for improvement and paint a picture of the value that thought leaders could add by applying their expertise in these areas.

Companies known for thought leadership in certain areas, such as Disney, have identified what they want to be known for (i.e., service excellence) and formed the Disney Institute to outsource their internal expertise, adding a new source of profit and building their brand equity. They created courses on the Disney approach to organizational creativity, people management, leadership, quality service, and loyalty. As they teach their success formulas participants can learn and adapt Disney's principles and practices back in their organizations.

Disney has even taken this idea beyond the classroom by opening their parks for real-time object lessons, providing participants with a personal experience of their culture and expertise within the Walt Disney World Resort. They find that the learning is even more powerful when they "let people observe how we do it."



Public recognition of your thought leadership will not happen overnight, nor is it guaranteed. Communicate those brilliant ideas that you apply to your clients' businesses in a dynamic, continuing dialogue with your market. This will help you evolve your ideas as the world changes around you, and will help you establish yourself as a leader in your field.

What Constitutes a Thought Leader?

Over the past several years Marshall has been listed as a thought leader several times including as #1 by Thinkers50 for several years in a row. This was the culmination of many years of work, and some good fortune. Many wonderful teachers, including Frances Hesselbein and Paul Hersey, helped both of us along the way.

To date we have written a combined 53 books and several best-sellers. Marshall's books have been million-sellers and have been listed as New York Times best-sellers. Publishing articles and columns in business publications, speaking a lot—about 100 days a year, and working with people inside corporations have expanded Marshall's reach and helped him stay in touch with the thinking of his audience. Marshall has been teaching the UBS High Potential Program, Wharton School, University of Michigan, Oxford, Cambridge, London Business School, and many of the top business schools. He gives keynote speeches for a variety of different associations and organizations, for anywhere from six to 6,000 people.

Marilyn working behind the scenes helped establish the content of his thought leadership, and bring together the followers he gathered through his work on site around the world.

Her ideas helped him identify opportunities that he could leverage through his network.

There have been several interviews written about Marshall, including *The New Yorker*, *Forbes* and *Harvard Business Review*. Press mentions about Marshall appear from as far away as Saudi Arabia. He has millions of frequent flyer miles because he found that in order to have a global presence one has to be present globally. A typical itinerary for Marshall might be from San Diego to Hong Kong, to Singapore, to Saudi Arabia, to London, to Houston, and back to San Diego in two weeks.

Leadership Excellence cataloged 100 thought leaders in the leadership field, and ranked them using a list of seven criteria: academic and professional preparation, character (including values, ethics, beliefs, purpose, mission, integrity, and walking the talk), principles (your big message, point of view, tenets, main points), personality (charisma, style, originality, authenticity, one of a kind), performance (inspiring action, real-world performance, work ethic), experience (national and international reach), expression (substance and style in writing, speaking, coaching, consulting, mentoring, training, or teaching), and influence (making a difference, results, change, transformation).

Many of these qualities could apply to internal as well as external thought leaders.

What Does it Take to Develop a Thought Leader Initiative?

From the organization's point of view, think about what the organization wants and needs. What would be the benefit to your organization if you were to develop internal thought leaders? What are the core competences of your organization's success? What types of expertise do your potential thought leaders possess? Is your organization ready for this?

It's important to recognize that not everyone will have the same ambitions. Some of your internal experts are happy just making their living practicing their profession. You can look for ways they can add value to areas of your organization beyond their own division, even if they don't want to make the effort to attain thought leadership in their larger market outside the company.

Think about your own role and what resources you can commit to championing this new initiative. It can mean a change in culture and role expectations within your organization. What can you do to increase buy-in and value to those participating?

Be very clear about your own goals for the project. How much time, realistically, can you devote to developing this project? Who in your organization supports this initiative? Who is not as enthusiastic and how important is their support to the success of your venture?

How will your goals shift as you place a priority on thought leadership? What needs to change? Who will be involved? How can you integrate thought leadership goals into goals already set for your company? It will take a team of people to make this work. Do you have the right people on your team, and do they have sufficient time to be an effective team member? Are they clear on your vision, and are you all on the same page?

What Does it Take to Become a Thought Leader?

From the thought leader's point of view, branding comes into play. What do you want to be known for? Your thought leadership should be your brand.

One guideline is to do what you love. We love what we do. We will probably never retire. If you do what you love, it doesn't feel like work. Most real thought leaders in our field never retire. For example Richard Beckhard and Peter Drucker never retired. Many thought leaders retire when we die! So our first suggestion is that thought leaders should love what they do.

Internal thought leaders can be chosen, in part, by their dedication to their specialty.

Second, pick something unique and learn all that you can about that one topic. Thought leaders need to be a world's expert at something. Marshall has a clearly defined mission. His mission is to help successful leaders to achieve a positive, long-term change in behavior for themselves, their people, and their teams. That's all he does. If you want to be a world's expert, you've got to be the world's expert at something. Pick something that you love, become the world's expert at that, and develop a brand identity about that.

Internal thought leaders can be even more specialized than external thought leaders by focusing on their company's unique market and industry.

Finally, thought leaders need to pay the price. It's really not complicated. The price is speaking, writing, networking, building relationships, making those long-term investments that don't necessarily produce short-term revenue, but make a long-term difference. You probably won't get paid to write articles and do interviews. But it's a positive foundation for the long term.

Internal thought leaders can speak at industry conferences, functional conferences, or market conferences that are important to their company. They can write in industry journals and company publications. They can work with external thought leaders on shared publications.

By knowing external thought leaders—and developing internal thought leaders—you can be better prepared to face the learning challenges of the future. LE

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