

THE THIN BOOK OF®

Smart People Skills

8 TOOLS FOR THE

***Savvy Leader*** 

## *Savvy Leaders Reviews*

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*Fantastic guide for new people managers or managers who struggle with their emotional intelligence (EQ) skills. The TIPS are great for a quick revision and are perfect for busy managers. The fabulous thing about this book is that the skills that Katina teaches can be applied to all manner of interaction with people - not just who you manage or work with. I see great value in applying these skills to improve the interactions that I have with my three children.*

**Samantha Zammit, Director Transactional Partner Group, Microsoft Australia Pty Ltd**

*This is a remarkable book. It takes complex concepts and makes them accessible. It enables managers to be better leaders of people. It's the ideal guide for aspiring people managers and for established managers who are puzzled by people and who are looking for insight. There are many, many useful tips in this book. Not least is the section on process. This much neglected area in the popular literature is critical if managers are to affect long-term and meaningful change. It's a must read.*

**Peter May, Regional HR Director, EMEA, Deloitte**

*A concise easy to understand set of principles..you keep on finding yourself agreeing with the content.. this book should be read annually by managers as part of the performance review process.*

**Colin Burns, Head of Treasury - BNP Paribas Sydney Branch**



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• • •  *Why read this book?*

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So often in the workplace, people who are immensely talented, highly driven and hard working fail to achieve the success they deserve. They progress well in their work up to a certain level where they seem to reach a plateau. They don't quite realize their potential, are unable to harness the potential of their teams, and find it difficult to gain full satisfaction from their working lives.

The disabling factor for these people, in my experience, is nearly always people skills — how to interact with, work with, and lead other people. Being able to create an environment that people want to work and excel in is becoming increasingly important. This book offers you succinct and useful tactics that will produce results toward your strategic goals. Applied consistently, these people skills will help you improve relationships and performance.

The information for this book comes from my more than two decades as a psychologist. I began witnessing the effectiveness of these people techniques during my very first experience as a business consultant. I was brought in to be a role-player at an assessment center for senior leaders, acting as a

disgruntled customer, a challenging direct report, and a demanding peer. Each senior leader had to role-play a new managing director on his/her first day on the job taking meetings with each of the three characters I was playing.

During the role-plays, I was often impressed with the managers' financial calculations, quick minds, and strategic solutions to the issues I presented. But in many cases this was not enough to gain my commitment or to address the issues. As a result, at the end of many role-plays, I would feel frustrated, not listened to, and sometimes angry. On the other hand, some role-plays left me feeling admiration for a leader who demonstrated both strong business acumen and great people skills. What were they doing differently? That is what this book teaches.

Since that first experience, I have worked with hundreds of knowledge workers and leaders and have found that they encounter similar patterns and frustrations in managing and influencing people. This book lays out the eight most common areas that impact your ability to influence and work with others. The tools summarized here describe recurring

challenges and provide methods to overcome them. In live coaching sessions, you would experience first-hand ‘a-ha’ moments of insight; this book allows you to put yourself ‘there’ and derive a similar benefit.

Much of what you read here is available in other places, usually in much thicker books that require teasing out the critical messages. The value of the content presented in this Thin Book is in its short and realistic format.

Whether the principles are new to you or are well-worn material, everyone can benefit from a potent and handy review of these tips — they are the foundation skills of savvy leaders.

A growing number of writers and thinkers in the field of leadership development discuss the critical impact of a leader’s self-awareness and relationship skills on their ability to lead and apply basic business skills. My 23 years of experience working with people — as a coach, consultant, and psychotherapist — have shown me that positive transformations can happen in relationships when people are more aware of themselves.

This book is about achieving breakthroughs. Breakthroughs in peoples’ performances can occur when

relationships improve and people can have more honest and real conversations about their work. By understanding the subtle and not-so-subtle dynamics that happen between people — beginning with understanding your own behavior — you will become more aware of habits that may be holding you back from becoming a more savvy leader.

In our fast-paced lives there seems to be more and more emphasis on our outer lives and on ‘doing.’ Regard this book as an opportunity to slow down for a short time to go inward a bit, to honestly reflect on your habits and how you relate to others at work. To get the most out of this book, I suggest you read a chapter at a time, reflect and then practice one or two tips. If you do, I am sure you will reap benefits in your personal and professional relationships and in your own and your team’s performance. Thank you for letting me be your coach and I’d love to hear how it goes.

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## Tool 1... Understand How You Think

A coaching client Robert told me he was putting off having a discussion with one of his direct reports, Pam. He needed to address the fact that she wasn't doing well in her position and wasn't eager to have the conversation.

*What's stopping you from having a meeting with Pam?* I asked.

He responded sheepishly. *I don't want to upset her. I don't want a scene.*

*How do you think you'll upset Pam?* I probed, hoping to uncover the beliefs that Robert was operating from.

*Because it's not going to be a nice discussion and she'll probably cry on me.*

*What makes you think that?*

*I don't know. I just don't want any emotional scenes.*

*What is it about emotional scenes you don't like?*

Robert thought about this for a moment and then replied, *They always end up badly and I don't want to risk that happening.*

By the end of our conversation, Robert realized he was operating from several beliefs that were contributing to his reluctance to confront Pam. He believed there would be an emotional scene, it would damage his relationship with Pam, and that conflict should always be avoided. Once Robert's thinking was revealed, we could then challenge his beliefs to test whether they were actually true or helpful. For example, Robert decided that he needed to do some more thinking about the value of conflict, exploring the notion that it can be a positive experience rather than something to be avoided. He also realized that he was assuming Pam would react emotionally and that would damage his relationship with her.

## **How We Think Has A Powerful Impact On Our Lives**

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is a very important and well-researched branch of psychology. Pioneered by Albert Ellis<sup>1</sup> and further developed by Aaron Beck,<sup>2</sup> it is based on the idea that our thoughts influence how we feel, and that our feelings affect how we think. How we think strongly affects most aspects of our lives, including our behaviors, relationships, work, and health. Some of our beliefs are conscious so we are aware of them. For example, you might have a belief that you can do anything you set your mind to. This belief would influence many aspects of your life: your confidence, your willingness to take risks, how you relate to others. Many of the other beliefs we hold are unconscious and operate outside our

awareness, yet their impact can be subtle and powerful. Without even realizing it, a leader might believe she can't trust others to do anything right. This unconscious belief can influence how much she is willing to delegate, how she relates to others, and, if she's doing too much on her own, her health.

Many researchers and psychologists continue to explore the link between our thinking and other aspects of our lives. Author Martin Seligman<sup>3</sup> writes that having an optimistic and hopeful thinking style can create better resistance against depression when challenging events occur, lead to better performance at work, and improve physical health. Barbara Fredrickson's<sup>4</sup> research into the effect of positive emotions — feeling grateful or upbeat, for instance — can broaden our thinking and build enduring benefits such as innovative ideas, novel actions and social connections. Her broaden-and-build theory refers to a mutually reinforcing spiral that can result in increased resilience, more creative and flexible thinking and ultimately, the ability to function at higher levels. On the other side of the spectrum, researchers have found that negative moods can help the brain focus on potential errors and distortions.<sup>5</sup> Knowing how moods can affect the creative or problem-solving process can help leaders set the right environment for a task or match a task to people's moods. If problem solving is needed, create a sense of urgency; if creativity is needed, use humor and fun.

## **How Thinking Develops And Changes**

How we think changes throughout our lives. We develop, refine, or change our beliefs based on life experience, teachers, friends, colleagues, books we read, and media we are exposed to. Many of our beliefs are constructive and helpful, while others may have restricting or negative influences. Robert's situation illustrates how thinking, feeling, and behavior influ-

ence each other in reciprocal ways. Our behavior can change how we feel. For example, two managers might form an initial impression that they don't like or respect each other and avoid getting to know each other. When they eventually talk, they find they feel more positive about each other. By changing their behavior from not talking to talking, they change the way they think and feel about each other. By taking the time to identify his underlying beliefs in relation to Pam, Robert could decide to think and feel differently about meeting with her, and consequently choose a different behavior.

- • •  The discrepancy between our expectations and how others actually behave has a huge influence on many working relationships.

### The Importance Of Knowing What You Think

Imagine that you believe your boss thinks you are incompetent. Think about how this might influence your feelings and behaviors at work. Now, imagine that you begin to feel increasingly negative about coming to work and interpret what your boss says as evidence that she really does think you're incompetent. Your boss, in turn, begins to be affected by your actions, judges you more negatively, and acts accordingly. You can see how this cycle can spiral, in either a positive or negative direction.<sup>6</sup>

This dynamic of how our expectations can influence how others behave has been widely researched in hundreds of studies<sup>7</sup> and is commonly referred to as the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy or Pygmalion Effect. It is important to understand how our thinking can co-create the dynamics in our relationships. Your thinking influences many aspects of your working life including:

**YOUR RELATIONSHIPS.** The types and number of beliefs we have about relationships are endless. They include beliefs about intimacy, conflict, support, feedback, trust, quantity and quality of contact, and emotions. For example, *Meetings are a waste of time* and *Emotions have no place at work* are two commonly held beliefs that could be operating in any given workplace. In our

working relationships, there are beliefs about what leaders, colleagues, and direct reports should do. We often assume that others think the same way we do. The discrepancy between our expectations and how others actually behave has a huge influence on many working relationships. What do you think others should do that they are not doing? How aware are they about your expectations of them?

**YOUR GENERAL HAPPINESS AND HEALTH.** Some leaders believe they can maintain good personal relationships and health while working unrealistic hours and traveling most of the year. Which of your beliefs related to your work affect your happiness or health positively or negatively?

**YOUR APPROACH TO PROBLEM SOLVING.** Our beliefs can expand or limit the way we approach problem solving and tasks. Consider phrases like: *We always do that ...* , *You should always...* , *It can't be done ...* . What beliefs do you hold that expand or limit people's ability to create and think in new ways?

**YOUR CONFIDENCE LEVELS.** I have met many confidence-challenged employees. Some beliefs we've uncovered where confidence levels are fragile include the following: *I should be good at ...* , *I'm never good enough*, *If I don't please everyone, I won't be liked.*

One manager in particular lived by this last belief to the point that he was exhausted from doing his job and helping his colleagues and direct reports with theirs. This belief contributed to his inability to say no to requests for his help. What beliefs do you hold that build or inhibit your confidence levels?

## **Identify Your Thinking**

It is particularly important to identify aspects of our thinking that we may not be aware of. Here are three ways to become more aware of your thinking:

> **1. ASK YOURSELF WHAT YOU'RE THINKING.** Catching fleeting thoughts can lead to discovering the beliefs that lie behind them. For example, a manager might think: *My direct reports are so incompetent, why can't they think for themselves?* Possible beliefs that may be operating in this scenario are: *They should know what I want them to do, People should think like I do, and They should do things the way I would.*

> **2. IDENTIFY HOW YOU ARE FEELING ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU DON'T FEEL GOOD.** You may regularly feel frustrated. Asking yourself why you might be feeling this way can be another way to uncover your thinking around an issue. You might feel frustrated and angry every time you are interrupted by one of your direct reports. Maybe you believe that you shouldn't be interrupted during a certain period and didn't tell anyone this, or that people should be independent and not need your help.

> **3. EXAMINE YOUR BEHAVIORS.** For example, Martin finds himself socializing at work far more often than he'd like. He goes to client events, goes drinking with his work mates on Friday nights, and often attends work dinners. He would prefer to be home with his family and often feels resentment and dread when another function comes up. He finally asks himself why he's going to these events and identifies two beliefs: *I should socialize at work and I'm a bad employee if I don't go to every function.*

## **Challenge Your Thinking**

Once you've identified a belief, you can challenge or dispute it.

### **ASK YOURSELF SOME OF THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:**

- *Is this true?*
- *Is it that important?*
- *Where did I get this idea?*
- *What's the worst thing that would happen if I did or didn't do that?*

- *Is this a realistic point of view?*
- *How might I be expecting others to think, feel, or behave like me?*
- *How might I be expecting others to read my mind?*
- *What assumptions am I operating from? About others? About myself?*
- *What assumptions would be more helpful for me to operate from?*
- *How much are my feelings helping me do what I need to get done?*

The manager constantly interrupted by her direct reports might need to rethink her beliefs by asking herself some of these questions: *Is it realistic to expect not to be interrupted if I haven't made it clear that I don't want to be? Given the present skill levels of my direct reports, is it fair for me to expect them not to ask for help? How is my frustration helping them or me? What assumptions are operating on both sides that are contributing to this situation?*

Some beliefs involve unrealistic expectations. Expectations that people will be competent and mature are totally reasonable, but expecting these qualities from all people all the time will lead to frustration, blame, and disappointment. Are you asking for perfection? Match your expectations with the realities of human performance and human nature. Great leaders understand their own thinking, feeling, and behaviors in relation to various people and situations. An increasing number of writers in the field of leadership development stress the importance of leaders' understanding and managing themselves. Authors Hogan and Warrenfelz,<sup>8</sup> for example, suggest that how one manages oneself has implications for all other aspects of leadership performance and that the most important area leaders need to be educated in is human nature — in particular, their own.

- ● ● ● ➤ An increasing number of writers in the field of leadership development stress the importance of leaders' understanding and managing themselves.

tips **UNDERSTANDING HOW YOU THINK**

**1. KEEP ASKING YOURSELF WHY.** To uncover beliefs, keep asking yourself why. *Why do I think that? Why is that an issue?* Keep asking until you get to a deeper level of thinking within yourself. Then challenge your beliefs. If, like Robert, you find yourself avoiding something, ask yourself why. Let's say you relate to the frustrated manager who bristles over being interrupted.

- **ASK YOURSELF WHY.**

- *I never seem to have time to get through my own work. Why?*

- *Because I keep getting interrupted by my staff. Why?*

- *They knock at my door and ask me questions. Why?*

- *They need my help and I have an open-door policy. Why?*

- *Because I think it's important to be available for my staff. Why?*

- *They might think I don't care and I'm never around. So what's the belief?*

- *I should be available all the time for my staff. Now challenge this belief:*

- *Is this actually true?*

- *Is it realistic for you to be able to do the work that requires no interruption?*

- *How could you make some uninterrupted time for yourself?*

- *How do you think your staff would react?*

- *Do they really need your help for every question they ask? If so, why?*

- *How have you contributed to this situation?*

- *What assumptions are you making about your staff?*

**2. GET A REALITY CHECK ON YOUR BELIEFS.** Besides asking why, it can also help to get a reality check. Ask trusted colleagues these types of questions: *Am I being realistic in expecting or thinking this?* Or *what do you think about the*



*way I responded? Or I reacted based on this premise. (State the premise) Do you think that was reasonable?*

3. **APPLY THESE IDEAS TO YOUR DIRECT REPORTS AND COLLEAGUES.** Help others to see what beliefs they may be operating from and how these affect how they feel and behave. This will help others learn to examine their own thinking and see the connection between their thinking, feeling, and behavior. You can ask helpful questions to consolidate this process of self-examination: *What was your thinking or premise behind taking that action? What is important about this for you? What do you think would have happened if you hadn't done that? How aware are they of what you expect?*
4. **MANAGING UPWARD: IDENTIFY AND CHALLENGE YOUR MANAGER'S THINKING.** Don't assume your manager has thought through all her ideas and priorities, or is aware of her thinking. By asking questions and challenging her thinking, you most likely will add more value to your discussions. Engaging with your manager in this way is an important aspect of managing upward.
5. **VIRTUAL TEAMS: ARE YOU ASSUMING YOU KNOW HOW OTHERS THINK, FEEL, OR BEHAVE?** If so, stop yourself. Sometimes we go through whole scenarios in our heads about why someone has behaved in a certain way without ever asking the person involved. Managing this tendency is especially relevant for virtual teams, where it is often easier to make assumptions rather than clarifying what is actually going on. For example, when a team member hasn't called you back; you may assume he's not going to do what you asked him to do. It is usually worth waiting for time zones to be aligned to phone and clarify why others have decided to do something or have not responded to a call or email. The less we interact face-to-face with others, the more chance there can be of building up distorted assumptions and beliefs about them.



**tips** 

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We have looked at the first tool in getting to know more about how you and others think. Now that we've explored the importance of identifying and managing beliefs and assumptions, let's look at the second tool — building relationships. This tool will assist you to continue building an understanding of what people think about and what makes them tick.

**6. CROSS-CULTURAL TEAMS: IDENTIFY DIFFERENT CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS AND BELIEFS.**

In your conversations, inquire about and discuss how your colleagues' cultural differences might lead to seeing things differently. In a team meeting, write a list of 'shoulds' or expectations that people from different cultures hold about specific areas like motivation, performance appraisal, or aspects of communication. Look for generalizations, similarities, and differences. For example: *Direct reports should never contradict their boss* compared with *It's important to challenge your boss*. Besides asking people directly about their culture, several authors have done extensive research on working and managing within different cultures. Some of their books are referred to in the following chapters and the resources list at the end of this book.