Six Rules for Better Thinking

A Reprise of Chapter 6 from The Art of Practical Thinking

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Introduction

I spend many pleasant and profitable hours browsing the shelves in used-book stores. My search is usually for older books pertaining to management and business, but problem solving, too, holds my interest and, recently, I chanced upon a rather remarkable book.

The Art of Practical Thinking was written in 1940. The author, Richard Weil, Jr., was president of Bambergers at the time. He was generally and genuinely unimpressed with the quality of the thinking displayed by his contemporaries and acquaintances and hoped, through his book, to make some modest contribution toward improving the quality of thinking in general.

Weil's concern about the quality of thinking was well founded. His book is instructive and rich in practical examples drawn from his experiences in the business world. Of particular interest to me is Chapter Six, where Weil set forth six general rules for better thinking. These rules are actually rules for solving problems. Weil's exposition is as timely and relevant today as when he first wrote it more than 50 years ago. So, without further ado, here are Richard Weil's six general rules for better thinking.

Rule 1: Establish immediately your best possible priority of problems.

Here, Weil was using priority in its sense of ordering. His counsel was first to be very clear about what he termed one's "hierarchy" of purposes, and then to be very clear about where in this hierarchy a given problem fit. Some problems, he observed, are more important than others, and some problems are not worth solving. More than 50 years after Weil expressed dismay at the alarming frequency with which people failed to prioritize the problems facing them, his counsel is still sound.

Rule 2: State your problem.

Weil attached great significance to the actual wording used to state the problem. Clearly an aficionado of the then burgeoning field of semantics, Weil's emphasis on the words used to state the problem was far from "semantic quibbling." His concern with the words used to state the problem drove deeper, to the goal of the effort, to the result to be achieved or, in more technical terms, to the solved state. Weil's example, one of department store executives trying to choose between two sales incentive systems when they should have been focusing on all the factors affecting sales, could be brought forward the 50-plus years since he reported it and no one would be the wiser.

Rule 3: Separate, as far as possible, all emotional influences from all rational processes, in the effort to obtain correct solutions.

Weil took care here to emphasize that his counsel was to separate emotional influences, not ignore them. The practical problem is to give the rational and the emotional elements the relative weight they deserve. Typically, the rational deserves more and the emotional less.

Rule 4: State your situation with respect to data.

Weil's counsel here is again common sense, which appears to be in as short supply now as it was in his time. What information is relevant to the problem? What do you know? What do you not know? What information is needed? Where is or who has the needed information? How might it be obtained? How reliable is it? It is important to note that Weil did not recommend collecting and analyzing data as an immediate first step in solving a problem. Indeed, in his analysis of the

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problem of exercising financial control over a business, he suggested that, in many organizations, far too much information was being collected and analyzed. This, too, seems true today.

Rule 5: Observe a fixed sequence of acts in the handling of problems.

Weil laid down eight steps or acts. They are:

1. Execute the appropriate and required processes of solution. (More on this later.)
2. State the tentative solution or solutions.
3. Choose one single tentative solution.
4. Make all available theoretic test checks of the validity of the solution.
5. Relate the solution to your planned priority of problems.
6. Make any necessary alteration in the solution indicated by relating it to your total plan.
7. Set up, where possible, measurements of the exactness of your solution.
8. Set up, where possible, advance measurements such that, when your solution is actually put to the final pragmatic test of action, you can properly determine how successfully it worked.

Weil provided little in the way of elaboration on these eight steps. He asserted they should be clear enough to follow, and that additional clarity would occur as a result of putting them into practice. I tend to agree.

Rule 6: Estimate, as well as you can, the loss-gain factor in probable solutions, and plan in advance the course of action if the solution is unsuccessful.

Weil's use of "probable" is worth explaining. Earlier in his book, in reviewing what he defined as the tools of thinking, he claimed that few knew the true meaning of probability. Most, he said, confused it with likelihood. Weil's view is that probable means credible or believable. As stated earlier, his book is most instructive.

Execution is Essential

Although tempted to add another general rule, Weil instead limited himself to pointing out that proper execution of the right solution is as essential to success as is finding the right solution. His concern stemmed from his observation that, in many cases, good solutions were often poorly executed, leading those involved to claim that the solutions, not their implementation, was at fault. This led, he believed, to a search for other solutions which, a priori, would be the wrong ones.

The "Appropriate and Required Processes of Solution"

Weil's six rules for better thinking were preceded by a discussion of six tools for use in thinking. It was to the proper use of these tools that the first of the eight acts above refers. These tools can be listed but not elaborated upon in a paper this brief. They are:

- Intuition
- Formal Logic
- Semantics
- Voluntarist Logic
- Symbolic Logic
- The Continuum

Weil defined thinking as "the process of arranging experience into patterns." Thus he argued, we cannot think about things we have not experienced. (Experience, by the way, need not be firsthand.)

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Intuition, to Weil, was thinking at a subconscious level. Weil felt strongly that "trained intuition," that is, the intuition of a person who has worked hard at mastering the other tools of thinking deserved its own status as a tool for thinking. But, in deference to his own insistence on careful classification, he allowed that trained intuition was more properly a subdivision of intuition.

Six rules and six tools; such was the substance of Richard Weil's book. For my money, it belongs on every manager's desk or bookshelf, but only after it has been carefully read. In this regard, Weil offered up yet another piece of advice: He encouraged his readers to read Mortimer Adler's *How to Read A Book*, which I am doing and which I am able to do because it is still in print. I am sorry to report that Weil's book is no longer in print. But, as he said of the many books he summarized in the course of writing his book, "I think I have given you the gist of what the author had to say."

Reference

Weil, R. (1940). *The Art of Practical Thinking*. Simon and Schuster: New York.

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