

Thinking Whole: Introducing 7-3-1

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Thinking Whole is a practice that turned into theory that evolved into a system. Thinking Fast and Thinking Slow are the two forms of decisioning, as Kahneman described it. But, as we just noted, there's a good bit more of which we humans are capable; such as invention, innovation, creativity, genius, and enlightenment, that are not encompassed by these systems. So, what's the "rest of the story?"

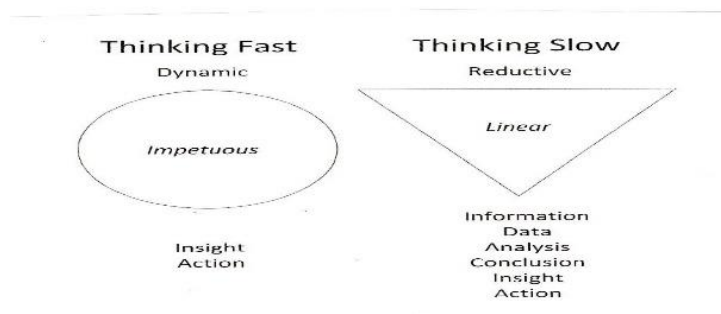
Clearly, neither of these two systems consider, much less incorporate those dimensions. For more than twenty-five years, we have been doing something with our clients. We have already described that "something" in earlier essays. It is only recently that we have amassed enough academic, scientific, and philosophical knowledge to explain it; hopefully well enough to be brief and hopefully so that you can not only make sense of the theory behind our success, but also find it possible to make it actionable to create yours.

How It Works

Thinking Whole is what lets you achieve repeatable moments of genius on demand. Achieving repeatable moments of genius on demand is how you create the future you deserve. In the next few pages, we will demonstrate how Thinking Whole fits into the schema of System One and System Two. In that model, Thinking Whole would be System Three or, as we prefer to think of it The Third Way. If that sounds a bit "eastern" or a little "Zen," let there be no surprise about that. We have made every possible effort to include and embrace all paths to enlightenment. In fact, some parts of The Third Way borrow heavily from eastern disciplines and philosophies.

One key aspect of Thinking Whole is a systemic provision of a sort of "placeholder" that allows for the manifestation of what we may yet not know; or more aptly, allows for the fact that Thinking Whole xxx we don't know what don't know – yet it should have a part in our thinking. In that sense, Thinking Whole takes Taleb's Black Swan event possibility into the arena of practical consideration.

But first, back to the basics. Here is a visualization of Thinking Fast and Slow:



Notice that both of Kahneman's systems are ways of moving from information to decision. The aim of either system is to close down the number of choices to get to the "right" choice and voila there's your right decision. This approach is not much different from the binary programming that runs computer algorithms. The process of Thinking Whole is considerably more robust. It provides an open structure and a safe space for the team to reach for higher levels of "enlightenment." Thinking Whole is more expansive in scope. It is simultaneously more disciplined and flexible. It "aims" for very specific outcomes.

The first targeted outcome is Actionable Insighting. Making sense of information so as to distill and crystallize the issue being discussed. Once that issue is crystallized; that is to say articulated in its most distilled and concretized form (because we finally understand it well enough to be brief) the system shifts to a process for achieving Actionable Inciting. The word "inciting" gets a bad rap these days; but its original Latin meaning was the "hastening" of something. In our system, the thing we wish to hasten are actionability and execution.

Most importantly, the discipline of TW provides room for manifesting that which we did not know we did not know and/or the identification of a Central Operating Principle (aka – "COP"). A COP is that which tells you and guides the action which naturally flows from the big insight. The difference between an insight and a central operating principle is that the first is an end in itself while the second is the point of shifting from thinking to doing.

There are two additional targeted outcomes: 1. Completing the process in one working day; preferably, less. 2. Tapping into the collective native intelligence of the team and/or the individual. We will go into greater detail on all of this shortly. But let's dwell a moment on the notion of the value and the importance of tapping into collective native intelligence (CNI). In a typical corporate or organizational meeting, the assumption is that each person will likely represent the point of view of their department or function.

That's the convention. But that's also shortchanging every individual's potential contribution; because every person has a wealth of other experiences, perspectives, skills, and talents. Each of us would benefit from personal decisions made through the conscious inclusion of our individual CNI. Multiply that by a team, access it through Thinking Whole... and ... well you can imagine the wonders that can manifest.

On a preceding page, there is a visual summarization of the way Thinking Fast, Thinking Slow, and Thinking Whole "fit" together with a bit more detail about each.. The perspective of each system is different. Thinking Fast, grounded as it is in the natural response mechanisms of the brain has, as its primary function, the intention of precipitating rapid, decisive, solutioning. As Gladwell observed in blink, we would not have survived as a species without being able to think without thinking. All living things have this fundamental survival mechanism; humans simply have evolved it to the point where it is not limited to the physical reaction but also to the cerebral.

Thinking Slow is all about making sense of information by consciously organizing it into patterns and deriving conclusions from those patterns. Certainly, thinking fast and thinking slow can, and often do, work together but they do not do so without some friction. In our experience, intuition tends to frustrate deliberation because it's always jumping ahead to the solution. Likewise, deliberation

frustrates intuition because it keeps insisting “not yet, not until I’m sure.” Thinking Whole embraces the value and the potential contributions of each system – and creates a place where both can “play nice.”

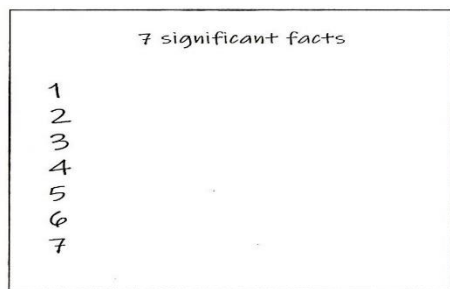
Of the three ways of thinking, Thinking Whole is the one which comes closest to being an actual, and literal, system. Thinking Whole is as effective as it has proven to be because it is built around a “follow the system step-by-step process,” as well. The reason this is so, is because Thinking Whole evolved from doing thinking rather than from thinking about thinking. It is also the product of chronic impatience. From “7-3-1” to Thinking Out Loud to Thinking Whole.

More than a quarter century ago, one of us [JK] was in a meeting; one of those endless, pointless, rambling meetings which we all endure far too often.

I was so frustrated that I walked up to the flipchart and said “Hey guys, we seem to be going all around this subject but not moving anything forward. Let’s lay it out so we can make sense of it. Shall we?” I intuitively (that would be System One at work) wrote one-through-seven along the left side of the flipchart. Thinking Whole 95 | Page Without knowing exactly why 7 (I would later learn that we can’t meaningfully hold more than seven ideas in the part of our brain where we process information), I headed the list “7 significant facts.” Looking back on that event, I would have to say that it was my own moment of genius.

Over the next decades, the importance of having selected the word “significant” became increasingly clear. In a typical meeting, we throw out a lot of ideas; mostly in an effort to appear to contribute. As the group worked to complete the list, the inevitable happened. Someone came up with an 8th significant fact.

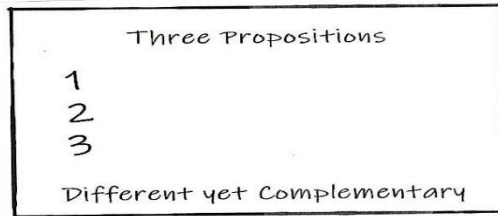
I instinctively knew (System One again) that if the list grew, we would meander back to the land of the lost. “Let’s just keep it to seven,” I said, adding “just the seven most significant facts. There can’t be more than seven.”



What ensued was something truly wonderful. Clearly, if the list remained at seven items, then anything added would be at the expense of something already on the list; which meant that we were now really looking at each item and beginning to perceive how the seven items on the list related to one another.

We were beginning to sense not only how significant each fact was but, more importantly, how significantly each fact contributed to a greater whole relative to the other significant facts. Instead of listing more and more facts, we were processing them into an overall understanding of the issue we had come there to discuss.

We were working together. We were invested in the facts. We were challenging each other. We were challenging ourselves. We were investing in each other's ideas. Most importantly, we were getting somewhere.



And then, it all stopped. We had completed the list of seven significant facts. Now what?

In another System One Moment, I made a shorter list; this time it was just three items. Why? I just "knew" that having seven facts was only the beginning of something. It was the foundation. But of what?

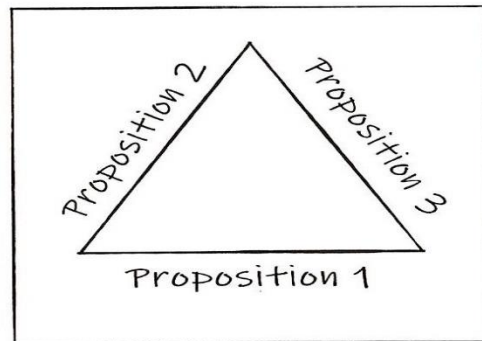
Something about the number "3" drew me in – so I drew IT! This is how it came out.

Why three? Well, three is the smaller number of elements needed to enclose a space; or to support a stool. It's a universal truth. Besides, trinities and triangles possess great power. Maybe it's as simple as that.

Maybe it also has something to do with Lao Tzu's observation that the universe is made up of three elemental forms: material, structure, and energy?

To differentiate them from the list of significant facts, I headed this list "Propositions" and added the subtitle: "Different yet Complementary."

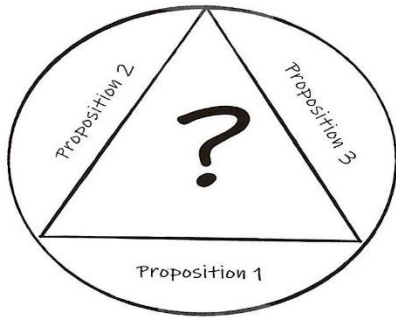
When I was asked about that, I simply answered (as if I had known this since the beginning of time): "Seven significant facts are the foundation."



We need to get somewhere with that. Let's come up with three statements that are simultaneously different yet complementary and that come from but are not the seven significant facts. "The three propositions need to relate to one another, and they also have to somehow connect the significant facts."

The triangle illustrated that we were looking for connections, not prioritizations. It also communicated the idea that we were putting together a "whole" of some kind, piece by piece.

When the propositions were completed, it became obvious (not just to me but also to most of the team) that, having completed, the propositions around the triangle, we had created a space – but what was it and what was it for?



It just sat there waiting for us to fill it in; and it wasn't giving us any clues.

If we defaulted to the standard ways of thinking in a meeting, we might have called it "the AHA!!! Moment."

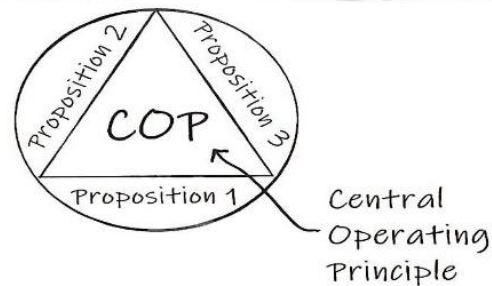
We could have stopped right there. In a marketing meeting we might have called this "the Big Idea" and stopped right there.

But our original goal was to come away from this meeting with the basis for an action plan – so we needed to see the space in the middle of the triangle as "marching orders" rather than solution.

We are both strong believers in the power of words. Words define. Words inspire. The right words precipitate action. A phrase I had never seen before crystallized in the open space. I wrote what I saw:

A Central Operating Principle does not tell you what you decided; it tells you what you need to do. It doesn't describe thinking; it defines action.

The Coca Cola Company has been working with the same operating principle since 1946. American GI's all over the globe were delighted to have a "taste of home" no matter where they were fighting. In at least a small way, the unique taste of Coke was a taste of the life and the freedom for which these men were fighting.

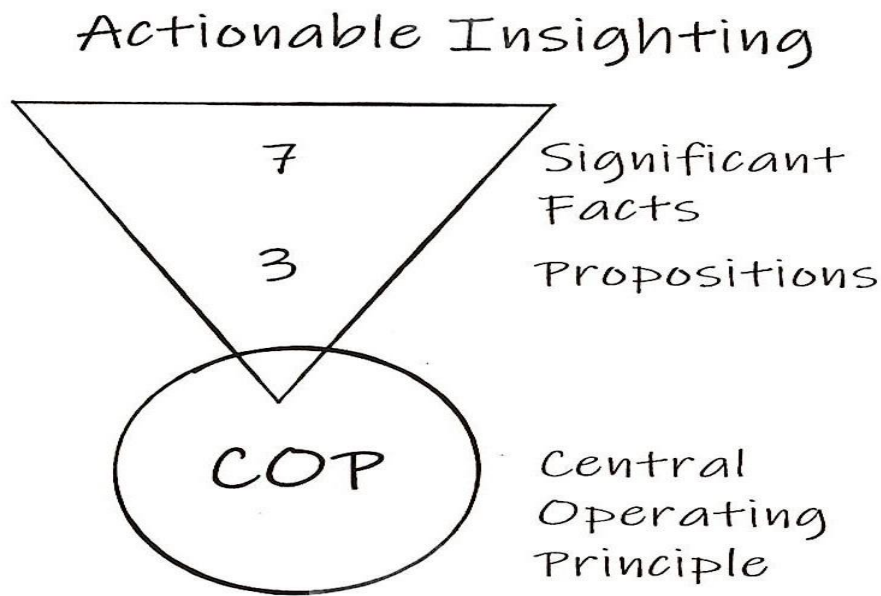


Every time a GI shared a taste of Coke with a local, something magical happened – the preference for the incredible American brown liquid was passed on to an ever-widening circle of appreciators, purchasers, and brand advocates. Coke's CEO at the time heard about this phenomenon and traveled extensively to see it for himself. He came back with what was the Central Operating Principle that made Coca-Cola a marketing power around the globe and has kept it there ever since.

If we asked you to tell us what you think that COP was, we have to assume your answer would be something like "Happiness," or "The Real Thing." It's not. The Coca-Cola Company's Central Operating Principle since 1945 has been: "Put a coke within an arm's length of everyone on the planet." Clearly, it's a marching order. It also makes it clear that the company's operating principle is not taste or joy.

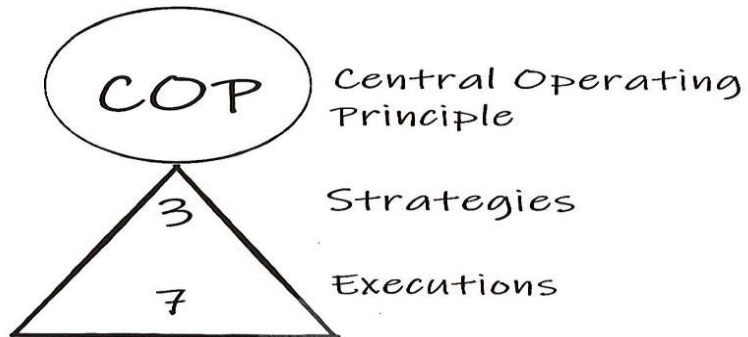
Its operating principle is distribution. You can't enjoy coke unless you can access it. No matter how wonderful an experience having a Coke might be; that experience is not possible unless you can get a Coke. Simple. Brilliant. Energizing. Prescriptive. Now that is a Central Operating Principle.

At this point, we had created the Actionable Insighting phase of what would become Thinking Whole. We called it, simply "the 7-3-1 process" and it looked like this.



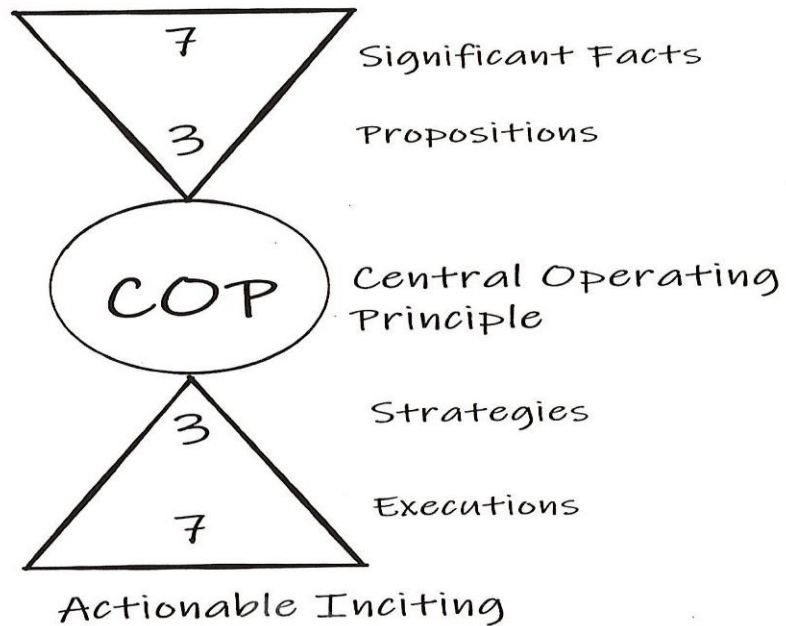
As time went by, we realized that the same sequence, in reverse, could provide a framework for actionability. If Actionable Insighting leads to the crystallization of the Central Operating Principle, then the Central Operating Principle should guide the ultimate executions (using the same approach) of that principle:

Actionable Inciting

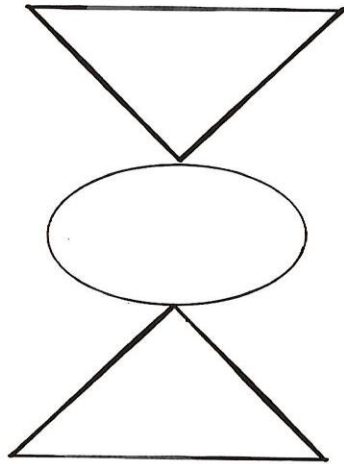


In a case of perfect symmetry, $7 > 3 > 1$ becomes $7 > 3 > 1 > 3 > 7$, in a complete system.

Actionable Insighting



The foundation of Thinking Whole is illustrated by the visual summarization we have just presented. The beauty of this visualization is that it serves as a kind of “wireframe” structure for Thinking Whole and a step-by-step guide for achieving it.



Follow the steps in each phase to advance the thinking of the group. Each step lets the team focus on – 1. Where you are in the process. 2. What you need to focus on in each step. 3. Where you need to get to next in the process.

Instead of “thinking” (whatever that might be), each member of the team, and the team as a whole, can see and contribute to the progression of something they can visualize.

Everybody knows where we’re heading together. And that’s how Thinking Whole was born.

If you strip away the labels, you are left with a form for Thinking Whole. Here’s what you can perceive as a result of that form: There’s more on this subject in the essay named “The Form”.