How to Nail Thought Leadership in 3 (Not-so-Easy) Steps

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I work in thought leadership. It's *literally* what I do for a living. I have 30 staff members in three offices around the world, and I even claim to be a thought leader myself. Recently, I was at a networking event where someone asked me, "What makes a thought leader anyway?" As someone who has been in the public relations game for 20 years, this is a question I've been asked many times. Something in the way the question was asked this time made me reflect more deeply on it.

I thought about it again as I was walking my dogs the next day. I wanted to put myself in their shoes, so I took out my phone and did what most people would do — looked on Wikipedia. It didn't help much, apart from an academic description and a note that the description had been applied to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was said to manifest "the wizard power of a thought-leader."

Putting my thoughts of embroidered robes and facial topiary to one side, I reflected on the question of thought leadership. That's when I had my lightbulb moment. Applying the maxim of keeping it simple, I tried to think about the key essences of successful thought leadership. I mentally whittled it down to three things: authenticity, being disruptive and vulnerability.

1. Authenticity

This word is almost certainly over-used, but I make no apologies for including it here; in my view, it's a key tenet of successful thought leadership. But what exactly does it *mean* to be authentic? It's entirely counterintuitive, because it's about giving away your secrets. I'm not talking about trade secrets, like the recipe for Coca-Cola, I'm talking about you personally. What have you learned in all your time doing what you do? Imagine you want to impart this knowledge at a big industry conference. You prepare a speech, crossing off the bits you think people wouldn't like.

This is your big mistake – because these are precisely the pieces of information you should be sharing. Your deepest insights aren't in the official, on-the-record, staged, probably rehearsed speech, although you would probably be candid about these in the bar afterwards with a few trusted colleagues. These insights have real value. The advice given in this informal environment after everyone else has gone home is genuine thought leadership; the whole truth so few people have the courage to tell while standing at the podium. This brings us to the second part: being disruptive.

2. Being disruptive

You know your industry inside out, and it's likely your colleagues already come to you for advice. If you can imagine dispensing these nuggets of new information or a genuinely useful insight – what I call an "eyebrow-raiser" – this generosity of spirit will be seen, and will truly make you heard. Think of them as little "packets of value." You're passing on something that gives the person insight or new information. Real insight involves addressing painful things, and therefore acknowledging pain, either your own or that of your colleagues, industry or company – and that pain is the very reason why people don't want to discuss it.

Genuine thought leadership has to be disruptive, otherwise it’s just flowery language. It’s about having an opinion that is authentically yours and then standing by it, and not being afraid to challenge the status quo, because it’s going to divide people. Some will agree with you, some won’t – but that’s a good thing if it’s done in a constructive way and provokes debate. Of course, this leads to vulnerability.

3. Vulnerability

Truly challenging or disruptive thinking is not something many people do, because it involves letting your guard down and showing people the real you, warts and all. One worry might be that someone could come along and say, “Ah, but you forgot about this.” That’s actually the best thing that could happen, because you can turn that into an opportunity for learning. If your aim is to be as candid publicly as you are with your colleagues, then frankly, you have to listen as well.

What most people don’t realize is that this is the very thing that makes people sit up and pay attention. Gone are the old days when it was seen as weak to admit your mistakes – nowadays its actually the opposite. It’s brave, people really appreciate the candor, and your vulnerability becomes your strength. People will read it and think, “Wow, that was brave.” You’ll often find these are things they have wanted to say themselves but they haven’t had the courage to do so.

Most people confuse thought leadership with the mechanics of it. They get distracted by which words to use, or where so say them. “Do I say this in a podcast or a press release?” The reality is, it doesn’t matter, because true thought leaders are disruptive in an emotional way. Being authentic will make people sit up and listen to you, because they know it’s real. Being disruptive means that you’re saying something meaningful. People will listen, because you are not afraid to challenge the status quo. The vulnerability this requires

takes genuine courage, which is why most people don’t do it. But if you do, whatever industry you are in, I can guarantee you will be an incredible success.

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