The Missing Responsibility

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to read a large number of job descriptions. In doing so, I have noticed the consistent absence of what might be thought of as “the missing responsibility.” Based on an institution’s style, job descriptions are more (or less) detailed: some are brief and summary in nature, while others are specific and thorough. But even the more detailed job descriptions leave out perhaps the most important responsibility of almost every job: “thinking.”

Perhaps it is just assumed that thinking is a nameless ingredient in the workplace. Maybe so. But try making a list of the various aspects of your work, and the odds are good that “thinking” will not be among them. Why? Because we typically consider work to consist of the things we do, and thinking is not a thing. Neither is it a tangible, visible activity. So “thinking” doesn’t make the list.

Since thinking is itself unquantifiable, performing outcomes assessment on it is also difficult, if not impossible. How much good thinking did you do this morning? That would be a hard question to deal with in an annual review. Maybe something as ephemeral as thinking should be left out of job descriptions after all.

On the other hand, for years we have heard that innovation has been America’s edge in virtually every industry—and especially in technology and higher education. Isn’t it difficult to imagine innovation without good, creative thinking? Isn’t thinking the skill that college and university faculties try to instill in students as the foundation for all the other subjects and disciplines they will explore? Of course it is. We urge students not to believe everything they read and to learn to be analytical, even constructively critical, in assessing and processing the information they encounter. “Think things through, and make up your own mind,” we caution them.

Yet we are not so quick to give such advice in the workplace, and that, I believe, is a mistake. It is easy to see the need for thinking in some positions—for example, those who are responsible for directing a department of an organization. If such directors are not actively and constantly thinking about the future of their part of the organization, who is? Ostensibly, directors know more about their department than anyone else. Their work involves not just keeping things going but continually making things go better.

Although I used the example of directors, I believe the responsibility for thinking extends throughout an organization. Thinking should be encouraged and rewarded in every position, bottom to top. For instance, I suspect that everyone who reads EDUCAUSE Review is accustomed to change. Change is the ongoing character of our digitally driven world, and unless something happens to halt the evolution of technology (and I’m sure none of us think that it will), the fast-paced change we have been experiencing will continue. All of us, therefore, must work to achieve our goals, knowing that the work environment will constantly shift in ways both large and small. How can we best thrive in such a context? By relying on our ability to think. This is precisely the context in which regular, insightful thinking can make the difference between winners and losers, failure and success, at every level in an organization.

Unfortunately, in failing to emphasize thinking in the workplace, we risk losing its potential. Thinking must be nurtured and facilitated. It is not so easy sometimes to get into the thinking mode. Those “to do” lists in our Blackberries are always stalking us. We feel like we are wasting time if we are not doing something tangible: making calls, answering e-mails, starting the next assignment or project. Nonetheless, it is critically important to develop the discipline of turning off the ringer, putting away the Blackberry, moving aside the laptop, and turning mentally to the challenges in our work.

But again, this is hard to do. Without institutional encouragement, we start to feel guilty, like we’re wasting time. Just sitting and thinking—isn’t there something “real” we should be doing? And even with encouragement, making the time to think takes practice, especially for those of us who have been out of school for a while. Thinking—especially useful, creative thinking—must be cultivated.

My hope is that our institutions of higher education will deliberately put more emphasis on cultivating good habits of thinking. I also hope that all of us, individually, will seek to raise our thinking to new levels of excellence. There may be nothing more important to our institutions or our careers than the missing responsibility: some good creative thinking.

Jerry D. Campbell is President of Claremont School of Theology.