Cognitive Leadership Thinking

Idea In Short

Leadership development often teaches behaviors, such as how to run a meeting or give feedback, and leaves out the thinking that drives them. Cognitive leadership starts one step earlier, with the mindsets, thinking styles, and habits of reflection that shape what leaders notice and decide. A growing body of research looks at how leaders think and how their thinking spreads through a team or an organization. This article explains what cognitive leadership means, what research says about mindsets, thinking styles, and reflection, how leaders can build a culture in which thoughtfulness becomes normal, and which traps to avoid when you try to make thinking a leadership practice.

A new director inherits a team that reacts to every request. People work late, meetings multiply, and the same issues return each quarter. The director blocks an hour on Friday for the team to ask one question: what did we assume this week that turned out wrong? After a month, requests still arrive, but the team starts to push back on poorly framed ones, and the weekly crises ease.

What cognitive leadership means

Cognitive leadership is an emerging field in which researchers and development practitioners study how leaders think and how that thinking affects teams. A practitioner article on reflective practice describes it as a field in which people try to rehabilitate the question what was I thinking by using it as part of a strategy for rigorous self-reflection.1

The same article explains that reflective practices help leaders rigorously examine their thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions, and consider what they could have done differently to get better results.

The idea is simple. Behavior follows thinking, so improving thinking improves behavior. Cognitive leadership aims at the source. It differs from a style guide, since it asks leaders to

look at their reasoning and not only at their actions.

Mindsets as drivers

Virginia Commonwealth University summarized research by two leadership scholars who looked at the underlying processes behind leaders' decisions and behavior, namely their mindsets. One of them argues that organizations that want a better return on leadership development should prioritize mindset development, targeting growth, learning, deliberative, and promotion leader mindsets.2

The release explains that a growth mindset is the belief that people, including oneself, can change their talents, abilities, and intelligence. It also notes that leaders with an implemental mindset focus on carrying out decisions, which can close them off to new and different ideas and information, and that those with a promotion mindset focus on winning and gains.

These distinctions help diagnose behavior. A leader who closes down debate after announcing a plan may be in an implemental mindset. A leader who chases every opportunity may be in a promotion mindset. Neither is wrong in itself, but the wrong one at the wrong time costs the team.

Thinking styles and leadership style

Research in Frontiers in Psychology tested the Cognitive Experiential Leadership Model, which proposes that leaders' preference for rational thinking and behavioral coping relates to how transformational they are. One study compared ratings from 160 leader-follower pairs, and another compared self-ratings and coworker ratings for 74 leaders rated by 607 coworkers. In both, leaders' rational thinking, imaginative thinking, and behavioral coping correlated positively with their self-rated transformational leadership.3

Read this with care. The relationships appeared in leaders' own ratings, and correlation does not show that a thinking style causes a leadership style. Still, the work supports the idea that how leaders think and how they lead are connected.

For practice, the lesson is to know your own default. Do you favor logic, intuition, imagination, or action? Knowing it helps you recognize when to borrow a different mode, or when to bring in a colleague who thinks differently.

Reflection as a leadership discipline

An article from the Association for Talent Development argues that executive thinking centers on three mindsets: reflective, relational, and strategic. It states that executives who do not reflect tend to react, and suggests beginning reflection with the question of what lies beneath the urgency one feels. For development professionals, it recommends structured silence, journaling prompts, and inquiry-based coaching.4

A book chapter on reflective leadership describes reflection as a process, both individual and collaborative, that involves experience and uncertainty, and links theory to practice by describing new leadership roles and responsibilities under reflective thought.5

A 2023 article by Madeline Ong, Susan Ashford, and Uta Bindl, listed in the University of Michigan's repository, studies individual work reflection and its impact on leadership in teams, under the title The Power of Reflection for Would-Be Leaders.6 Reflection appears here as a practice that can shape how people lead.

What this means for leadership development

Many programs teach skills such as delegation, feedback, and negotiation. Those skills matter, but they rest on how a leader interprets a situation. A leader who reads a missed deadline as laziness will give different feedback from one who reads it as a planning failure.

Mindset work therefore belongs inside development programs, not beside them. Add exercises in which participants describe a recent decision, name the assumptions behind it, and look for the mindset that shaped it.

Pair this with peer discussion. Leaders often see their own patterns more clearly when colleagues describe how they interpret the same events. Over several sessions, the group builds a shared vocabulary for talking about thinking.

Finally, measure what you can. Track whether decisions get reviewed, whether teams surface assumptions, and whether the same problems recur. Such measures show whether the thinking is changing the work.

Building a thoughtful culture

Culture follows what leaders do. If a leader rewards quick answers and punishes questions, the team learns to answer quickly. If a leader asks what we are assuming, the team learns to examine assumptions.

Model the behavior in public. Think aloud in meetings, such as saying what you are weighing and what would change your mind. Admit when you changed your view and why.

Build routines that make thinking visible and normal. A short pause before decisions to state assumptions, a standing question at the end of each project, and a regular review of decisions and their outcomes all turn thoughtfulness into habit.

Protect time. Thinking needs room, and teams under constant pressure default to reaction. Defend blocks of unscheduled time, and treat reflection as part of the work and not a break from it.

Link it with the rest of this series. Reflective journaling, thinking routines, and debiasing all offer concrete practices that a leader can adopt and teach.

Questions a cognitive leader asks

A cognitive leader asks questions that surface thinking. What problem are we really solving? What are we assuming? What evidence would change our view? Who sees this differently? What did we learn from the last decision like this one?

They also watch their own mindset. Am I closing this discussion too early? Am I chasing a win at the expense of learning? Am I listening for confirmation, or for information?

Over time, these questions spread. Team members begin to ask them of each other and of the leader, which is the sign of a culture in which thoughtfulness has taken root.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a hypothetical operations vice president who notices that her managers escalate every problem and offer no analysis. She changes three things. She starts each staff meeting by naming one assumption she is testing. She asks managers to bring a one-paragraph view of the cause before they bring a problem. And she holds a monthly review in

which the team looks at past decisions and asks what they assumed.

After a quarter, escalations carry short analyses, and managers begin to challenge each other's assumptions in meetings. Fewer issues return, and the vice president spends less time firefighting. The company and results are invented, but the example shows how a leader can shift culture by changing her own habits and the team's routines.

Cautions

Do not turn reflection into a ritual of self-criticism. The aim is to learn, not to punish yourself or others. Keep the tone curious.

Avoid slow paralysis. A culture of thoughtfulness still needs decisions. Match the depth of thinking to the stakes, and move when the cost of delay exceeds the value of more analysis.

Finally, remember that self-ratings can mislead. Leaders often see themselves differently from how others see them. Ask for feedback from colleagues, and treat it as data.

- 1Increasing leadership effectiveness through reflective practice
- 2Researchers identify commonly overlooked key attributes of effective leaders, Virginia Commonwealth University
- 3Leaders' thinking styles and leadership styles, Frontiers in Psychology
- 4Think like an executive, Association for Talent Development
- 5Reflective leadership, book chapter
- 6The power of reflection for would-be leaders, University of Michigan repository

Summary

Cognitive leadership thinking means treating how leaders think as a core part of leadership and building a culture where deliberate thinking is normal. Research suggests that mindsets such as growth, learning, and deliberation shape decisions and behavior, that leaders with rational and imaginative thinking styles tend to rate themselves higher on transformational leadership, and that structured reflection helps leaders avoid mere reaction. A thoughtful culture grows from what leaders model, what routines teams follow, and what questions

people feel safe to ask. Leaders should start with their own habits. Block thirty minutes this week for reflection, and write down one assumption you want to test.