Thinking Routine Thinking

Idea In Short

Most teams think well only when someone happens to ask the right question. A thinking routine removes the luck. It is a short, repeatable sequence of prompts that a group uses again and again until good questioning becomes a habit. Harvard's Project Zero developed many such routines for classrooms, and the logic carries over to boardrooms, project reviews, and client work. This article explains what a thinking routine is, why simple ones tend to work best, how to choose and introduce one, how to build your own for a business setting, and where routines go wrong when people treat them as rituals instead of tools.

A team lead opens every weekly review with the same three questions: what did we see in the numbers, what do we think it means, and what does it make us wonder. At first the questions feel mechanical. After a few weeks, people arrive with observations already sorted, and the conversation moves from arguing about conclusions to examining evidence.

What a thinking routine is

A thinking routine is a short, structured pattern of prompts that people use repeatedly to guide their thinking. The routines most widely known come from Project Zero, a research center at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The center describes its broader Visible Thinking work as a flexible and systematic, research-based approach to integrating the development of students' thinking with content learning across subject matters.1

The word routine matters. A routine is not a one-off exercise. It is something you do the same way many times, so that the pattern becomes familiar and the thinking inside it can deepen.

Business teams already use routines without calling them that. A daily stand-up, a retrospective, and a pre-mortem are all repeatable questioning processes. A thinking routine simply makes the questioning explicit and deliberate.

Where the idea came from

Project Zero's Visible Thinking initiative was led by David Perkins, Shari Tishman, and Ron Ritchhart. A Project Zero article on pedagogy describes the original routines as part of that research initiative more than twenty years ago, and notes that researchers have since refined them and developed new ones.

Ritchhart's idea was that thinking is usually invisible. If a teacher or a manager can make thinking visible through speaking, writing, or drawing, the group can discuss it, improve it, and learn from it. An article in Educational Leadership by Ritchhart and Perkins puts the point simply: when learners speak, write, or draw their ideas, they deepen their cognition.2

That insight travels well. In a business setting, most reasoning stays inside people's heads until a meeting forces a conclusion. A routine drags the reasoning into view earlier.

Why simple routines work

The Harvard Graduate School of Education notes that routines like See, Think, Wonder might seem almost too simple, and that they were designed that way, to be easy to remember and use.3

Simplicity matters for three reasons. First, people can recall a three-question routine under pressure, while they cannot recall a ten-step framework. Second, a short routine takes little time, so teams will actually use it. Third, a simple structure leaves room for the content to carry the thinking.

The same article describes See, Think, Wonder as a classic example and says that repeated, intentional use can encourage close analysis and thoughtful interpretation.

Complex frameworks have their place, but they often fail at the habit stage. A simple routine that a team uses weekly beats a sophisticated one that a team used once.

A closer look at See, Think, Wonder

The routine has three prompts. What do you see? What do you think about that? What does it make you wonder? Project Zero describes it as a routine for looking closely and making

connections to deepen understanding.

The order does the work. The first question asks for observation without interpretation, so the group collects facts before arguing about meaning. The second question invites interpretation and asks people to link it to what they saw. The third opens inquiry and surfaces questions that the group can pursue.

In a business review, you might put a chart or a customer complaint on the table. People first say only what they see. Then they offer readings. Finally, they list what they would want to find out. The sequence slows down the rush to a conclusion.

Routines beyond the classroom

Thinking routines now travel well outside schools. Edutopia describes Visible Thinking as a research-based initiative from Harvard's Project Zero with more than 30 routines, and shows teachers using See, Think, Wonder to help learners analyze graphs, text, infographics, and video at the start of a unit.4

A manager can borrow the same move. Put a dashboard, a customer email, or a competitor's product page in front of the team and run the routine on it. The artifact gives the conversation a shared focus, and the prompts keep people from jumping straight to opinions.

A university pressbook that summarizes core routines describes them as simple, flexible activities that scaffold thinking and make cognitive processes more visible, and notes that they suit many disciplines, age groups, and learning environments.5 That breadth is the reason the approach fits a workplace as easily as a classroom.

Choosing a routine for the purpose

Routines differ by purpose. Project Zero's guidance on selecting a routine groups them by the thinking they support. For example, See, Think, Wonder encourages careful and thoughtful observation and sets the stage for inquiry, while Think, Puzzle, Explore activates prior knowledge and generates ideas and curiosity.

Start by naming what you need. If the group must look closely at evidence, choose an

observation routine. If it must surface assumptions, choose a routine that asks what people already believe. If it must explore options, choose one that generates alternatives.

Matching routine to purpose avoids a common failure, in which a team uses the same routine for everything and loses interest.

Using the same routine repeatedly

One piece of Project Zero advice runs against intuition. Rather than using a different routine with every artifact, the archive suggests using the same routine, such as See, Think, Wonder, with multiple artifacts.

Repetition builds fluency. The first time a team uses a routine, people spend effort on the format. After five rounds, the format fades, and attention goes to the content.

For a manager, that means resisting the urge to rotate through new techniques every month. Pick one routine for a recurring meeting, keep it long enough for the habit to form, and only then add another.

Building your own routine

You can design a routine for your own context. Begin with a purpose, such as testing a plan or reviewing a decision. Write three or four short prompts in a logical order. Keep each prompt to a single question.

For example, a project review routine might ask: what did we expect, what happened, and what will we do differently. A client discovery routine might ask: what do we know, what do we assume, and what do we need to learn.

Test the routine with a small group, watch where people stumble, and revise the wording. Good prompts feel obvious after you have used them. If people ask what a prompt means, rewrite it.

Introducing a routine to a team

Explain the purpose before the steps. People accept a routine more readily when they

understand what it protects against, such as hasty conclusions or missed evidence.

Model it first. As a leader, answer the prompts yourself, in front of the group, about a real issue. Your example shows that the routine is for thinking and not for performing.

Give the routine a fixed home. Attach it to an existing meeting so that it does not feel like extra work. Then collect feedback after a few rounds and adjust.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a hypothetical software company whose product reviews often drift into debates about opinions. The head of product introduces a three-question routine for every review: what do we see in the usage data, what do we think it means, and what does it make us wonder.

In the first month, meetings run slightly longer. In the third month, the team arrives with data already summarized, and disagreements shift from whose opinion wins to which evidence is missing. The head of product notices that quieter team members now contribute, since the first question asks only for observation. The scenario is invented, but it shows how a simple routine can reshape a group's habits.

Cautions

Routines can turn into rituals. If people answer on autopilot, the routine produces noise. Change the topic, vary the artifact, and ask follow-up questions that probe the answers.

Do not overload a routine. A seven-question routine will lose people. Keep it short, and add depth through conversation instead of more prompts.

Finally, remember that a routine supports thinking and does not replace it. It works best when people bring real curiosity, and when the leader treats the answers as material for decisions and not as a box to tick.

- 1Project Zero thinking routines
- 2Making thinking visible
- 3Think better, Harvard Graduate School of Education

- 4Boosting critical thinking across the curriculum, Edutopia
- 5Thinking routines from Project Zero, ETSU pressbook

Summary

Thinking routine thinking means embedding short, repeatable questioning processes into how a team works so that good thinking becomes a habit. Project Zero designed routines such as See, Think, Wonder to be easy to remember and use, and its researchers suggest that repeated, intentional use deepens analysis and interpretation. In business, a routine can open a meeting, frame a review, or test a plan. The best routines stay simple, fit a clear purpose, and repeat often enough to stick. Pick one three-question routine, use it in every project review for a month, and watch what your team starts to notice.