Encourage deep thinking on your team

The late Tony Athos would sometimes sit on a bench outside the Harvard Business School and think deep thoughts. Asked what he was doing, he'd say, "Nothing." Only later would the business professor offer his profound insights.

Remembering Athos, the business school posed some questions on an online forum asking chiefly, "What is your organization doing to combat the absence of deep thinking?" Here's an encapsulation of 136 answers from around the world.

Problems

- **Not their job.** It seems managers don't need to think; they're hired only to carry out their leaders' ideas. "Troublemakers" get punished for independent thinking (*see related article*).

  Managers describe their roles as providing answers, not raising questions, with the prize being a promotion. In such a stifling atmosphere, kowtowing wins. *One response:* "There's constant gaming going on to look qualified and ready for anything." Anything, that is, except deep thinking.

- **No time.** Reasons vary from daylong meetings to the tyranny of e-mail. Responses include "overwhelmed with the task at hand" and "too swamped."

- **No respect.** "Why would any manager-level person … want to be identified as a deep thinker? That's a death wish. Problem-solver, yes. Quick decision-maker, yes. Bias for action, yes. Deep thinking? No."

- **Too hard.** (1) Change agents are likely to become scapegoats. (2) Nobody wants to risk short-term performance. (3) There's not enough brain power. (4) There's too much disruption. (5) Changing your mind is not considered good form.

Solutions

- **Promote and protect independent thinking** among your employees. Share ideas, don't steal them. As for yourself, you don't need permission to think.

- **Pursue every thread of thought to its logical conclusion,** factoring in the huge emotional freight.

- **Focus attention on adapting to change,** particularly in large organizations. Welcome outside opinions.

- **Curb your enthusiasm for attractive up-and-comers.** A snappy, confident candidate does not necessarily make the best hire. Consider the quiet, contemplative thinker.

- **Give employees a block of time every week** to turn off all devices and think deeply.

—Adapted from "Why Don't Managers Think Deeply?" Jim Heskett, HBS Working Knowledge, http://hbswk.hbs.edu.

I think, therefore I am … outta here

Deep thinking in management? Respondents to an online discussion recently suggested that anyone with a big idea should leave the organization to pursue it. "There's a name for managers who think deeply: entrepreneurs," one writes.

Why so? Because of a common view that organizations need doers, not thinkers.

"It is easy to spot many examples of family-owned businesses where no one except the founder does any thinking, immaterial of their ability, potential or education," says a consultant, adding that deep thinking is like a sport that everyone wants to play.

Conversely, in large operations, it takes courage to stand out from the crowd—"a courage lacking in most career-oriented individuals," adds another. "That's why so many leave organizations to start their own businesses."

Idea generators also leave because so few are recognized or rewarded. Executives right below owners and presidents sometimes stifle ideas, if they don't steal them outright. And when an idea goes sour, responsibility may revert to the manager who put it forward.

"The risk is too great to think deeply," a marketing executive says. "The reward is too small."

Lesson: See the previous article to make your workplace safe for deep thinking.