



THE NOISY ORGANIZATION

...*How CAN YOU HEAR YOURSELF THINK?*

JON THOMPSON

I have had the opportunity to visit many wonderful places on this planet, however, I believe that I have the privilege of living in one of the most beautiful cities in the world, Vancouver, Canada. Here on the West Coast we live in a coniferous rainforest populated by spectacular cedar, spruce and fir trees surrounded by the ocean and mountains. The majestic Coast Mountain Range begins here, forms the northern perimeter of the city and extends north along BC's coast right through to Alaska. Framed by two of our local mountains, Mt Seymour and Mt Fromme, is a fifteen-mile paved bike trail through the heart of the forest with undulating hills and sweeping corners. I do this ride often and find that I do some of my best thinking when biking this trail. I find it a much-needed distraction from the continuous commotion and clamor of my office. However, during one of my recent rides, this all changed for me. I was trying out the new helmet I had recently purchased and as I picked up speed I experienced an annoying, loud whooshing sound as the wind blew past my ears. This unwelcomed addition to my usual peaceful ride soon went from being an irritation to a maddening intrusion. Just as I was about to remove the offending helmet, I realized that if I just turned my head slightly to the side, the noise would disappear. Ah...relief! I could once again take in the tranquility and beauty of the woods while cruising at a high speed and, most importantly, I could think again. And now that I was back in my peaceful zone, I was immediately struck by how the process I had just experienced was such an apt metaphor for the challenge most organizational leaders face every day and I found myself wondering, how can leaders turn their heads to shut out all the noise of the organization so they can fully utilize their minds to enhance their leadership?

Organizations are inherently noisy and we are engulfed in a world of sound from the moment we wake until we close our eyes and fall asleep at the end of the day. Do you ever *listen* to your organization? This may seem like an odd question; however, I would encourage you to try it sometime. On a daily basis, we are bombarded with noise from alarm clocks, email notifications, meeting reminders, horns, background music, cell phones, and TVs, and they all create a constant buzz that leaves little room to focus on what is most important to us and our daily processes.

So, what is a leader to do? Many books and articles have been written praising the virtues of long, reflective walks, abandoning one's cell phone, and spending time behind closed doors in meditation and quiet contemplation – all good stuff, however for many leaders, not always practical when deadlines loom, staffing challenges arise and everyone seems to be competing for your time. How can leaders today “turn their heads” to cut through all the noise of organization life and hear what they need to hear?

Here are six potent actions you can take that I have learned from our wonderful clients and my colleagues at Bluepoint.

1. **Don't touch that keyboard.** And, if you must, don't hit that email icon. Give yourself time every morning uninterrupted by the events of the past twelve hours to plan your day, contemplate your important challenges and opportunities and make the choice that this will be a great day for you.
2. **Listen for your top priorities.** Discipline yourself to put extra effort into listening for what is most important to you. Maybe you need to listen for ways to make your organization more effective to seize market opportunities and/or to create product innovations? Our minds love routine and given a chance, it will create “thinking habits” and automatically tune you into a frequency that will increase your effectiveness.

- 3. Stop talking so much** and be more intentional of what you are saying and how you can focus on saying what is truly important. It can be difficult to accept, but you are likely adding to the volume of noise for yourself and those around you. Many leaders talk about hundreds of unimportant things because they lack the will (and, possibly, the courage) to talk about the very, very few important things. A good rule is this: if you have nothing to say, say nothing at all.
- 4. Get present with people.** Most leaders live in a near constant state of divided attention and, ultimately, spread themselves too thin to be truly present with others. However, to truly hear someone, you need to develop the ability to bring your full attention to another person and temporarily putting aside distractions and be fully in the here and now.
- 5. Welcome silence into your conversations.** Step into any elevator anywhere in the world and you will quickly recognize that people are often uncomfortable with silence. We will talk about the weather or any other unimportant topic just to break the tension. If you want to hear what someone is really saying, pause for a few seconds after every time they speak. You will be able to listen beyond the words and will be able to truly absorb, process and respond to what they are saying to you.
- 6. Eat a Frog.** Mark Twain's quote "If you eat a frog first thing in the morning that will probably be the worst thing you do all day." This is often recommended as an antidote for procrastination (do the tough stuff first) but it is really more than that. By getting the difficult, often emotionally-draining things out of the way, we quiet the internal noise of worry and concern.

Leaders, ask yourself these questions: how *loud* is your organization? How creative are you at work? How much deep, fresh thinking do you do in a typical day? Taking the time to actually *listen* to your organization can give you the ability to navigate through the distractions, it can provide one with clarity and, ultimately, it maximizes your effectiveness of what you can accomplish in a day. I challenge you go out and find your space to dampen the noise around you and take your leadership to new levels of effectiveness.



Jon Thompson is the Manager, Technology & Design for Bluepoint. He is responsible for leading a team of talented designers and developers who create Bluepoint's industry-leading educational materials, workshop collateral, video productions, virtual learning applications and web/social media systems He welcomes your comments by e-mail.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
CALL: (513) 683.4702
TOLL-FREE: 1.888.221.8685

E-MAIL: jonthompson@bluepointleadership.com

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