

~ THOUGHT LEADERSHIP ~

HOW TRUE LEADERS CAN BROADEN THEIR HORIZONS



BY MARK VAN DER LINDEN

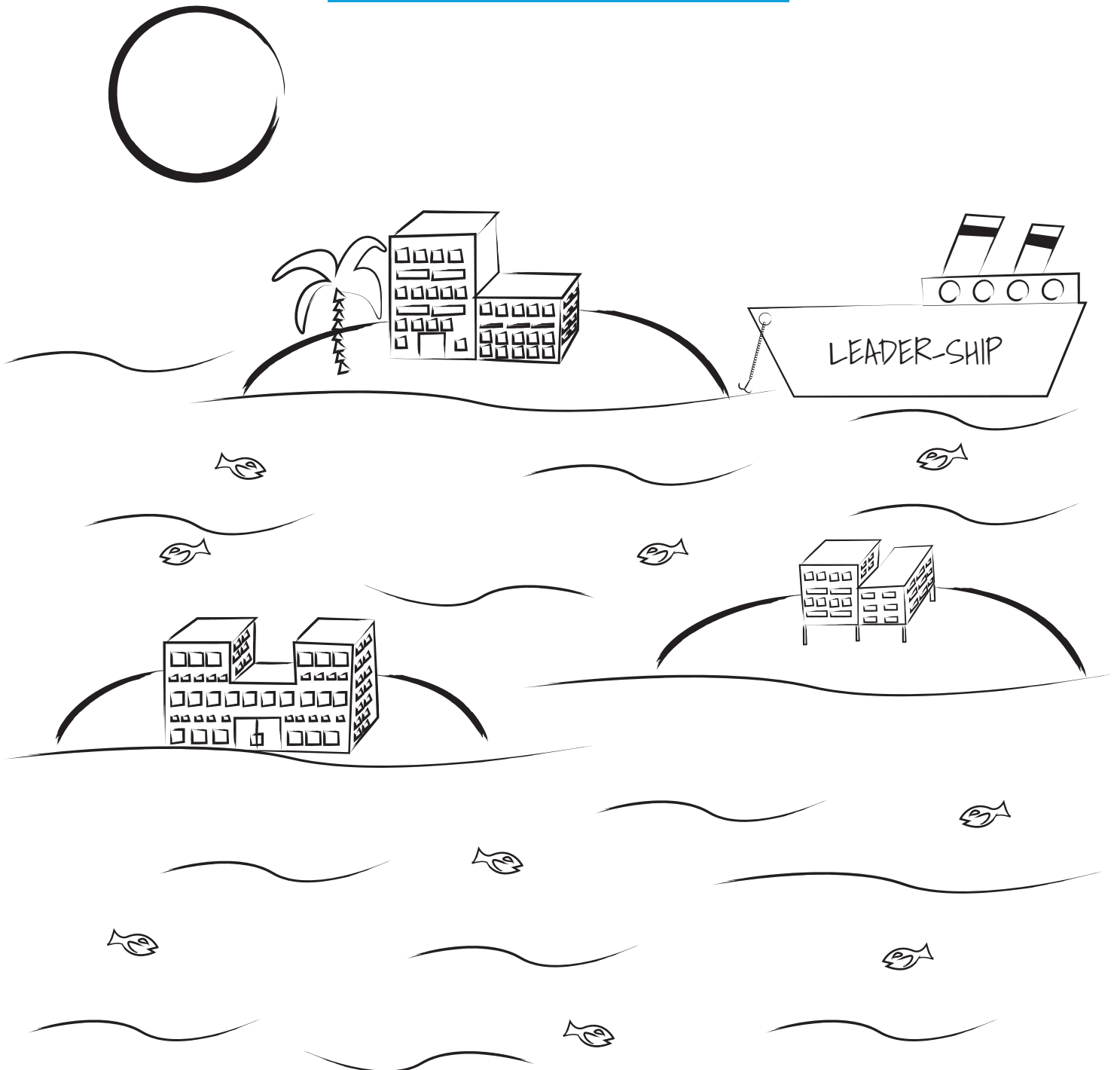
This trending topic is written by Mark van der Linden, graduation student Communication at Fontys University of Applied Sciences, under supervision of lecturers Ellen van Kuppenveld and Marc Dubach, lector Mignon van Halderen and applied researcher Bran Martens.

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ALL HANDS ON DECK!

Once upon a time, there was an organisation located on an island in the middle of a large ocean. The organisation had many ideas about the world around it, but all these years, no-one had really heard its voice. Stakeholders on the islands surrounding the organisation only seldom came into contact with it. Their relationship was purely functional in nature. One day, the organisation had become so motivated to disseminate its ideas that it quietly started to put an amazing plan into action. For years, it had invested hard work in finding a possible breakthrough and now the time had finally come. The Leader-Ship is ready for departure...



What is thought leadership?

To get a clear view of what thought leadership really is, it is helpful to view the two words separately. Thought and Leadership will first be described as individual terms, will then be examined as a single term. Although the two components are inseparable, describing them separately in terms of their content provides clarification. When the components are subsequently viewed together again, a definition will be formulated, which will serve as a basis for the remainder of this paper.

Thought

'Thought' might be described as 'range of ideas'. Van Halderen divides Thought into two components. On the one hand it consists of 'intellect'. This is the knowledge and expertise an organisation has, possibly complemented by relevant R&D activities and innovations. On the other hand there is the so-called 'Novel Point of View.' This could be described as 'an innovative perspective from which one examines a certain relevant theme (Van Halderen, 2015)'. An essential criterion for a Novel Point of View is that the perspective it offers must be truly innovative, which leads to the origin of new insights which we were not able to discover before. This method of perception makes it possible to break the existing state ('status quo'). It brings about an 'AHA' effect which leads to new insights (Van Halderen, 2015). Having a clear and distinctive Novel Point of View is very important for organisations striving to implement a thought leadership strategy, and also offers considerable advantages. For example, it communicates what you stand for as an organisation and the changes you wish to bring about in society. In addition, and as noted previously, it will trigger new ways of thinking, which will attract like-minded stakeholders. Finally, a clear Novel Point of View can inspire and engage the organisation's own employees.

CONCEPTS

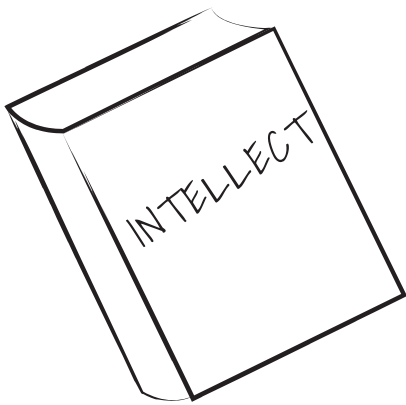
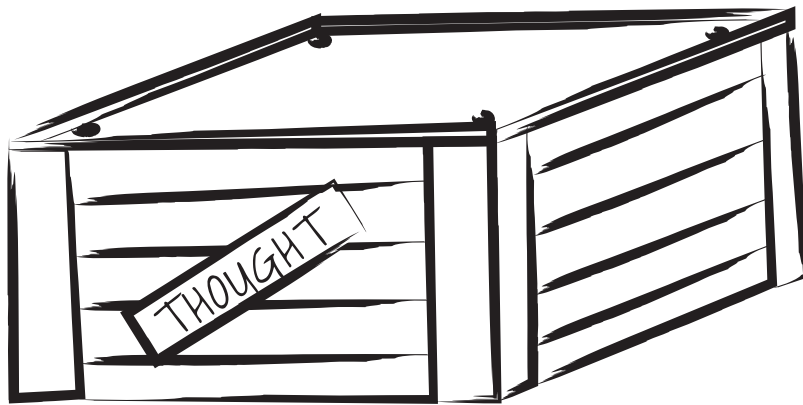
THOUGHT: 'Range of ideas consisting of intellect and a Novel Point of View'

INTELLECT: 'The knowledge and expertise which an organisation has, potentially complemented by relevant R&D activities and innovations'

NOVEL POINT OF VIEW: 'An innovative perspective from which one examines a certain theme'

In every decision an organisation makes, the current identity (who the organisation is) is supposed to serve as the starting point. The reason for this is that identity determines how the organisation views the outside world, or in other words, defines its point of view. It is therefore not surprising that the organisation's identity is of great importance in formulating the Novel Point of View. In order to maintain credibility with both internal and external stakeholders, these two aspects must be aligned. A Novel Point of View, or even the complete Thought, cannot simply be 'devised'. It is a logical consequence of the organisation's identity. If, for instance, Volkswagen were to convey the message that the environment is its most important concern, very few people would find this credible in light of the car manufacturer's recent emissions scandal.

In line with its identity, the organisation has created a Thought. The Thought consists of a large chest full of books (Intellect) and spectacles (Novel Point of View). These chests are however still on the island and must be shipped in order to disseminate the Thought amongst stakeholders.



Leadership

At first glance, the aspect of 'Leadership' seems to be a lot less complicated than the 'Thought' component, but must nevertheless not be underestimated. Just like Thought, Leadership can be broken down into two components: 'Internal Leadership' and 'External Leadership'. Internal Leadership must be in order before External Leadership can be properly expressed.

Internal Leadership

As described previously, internally, the new course (read: thought leadership strategy) should fit in seamlessly with the identity and expertise of the organisation. The employees should be on board with the new perspective and realise that their organisation is the leader in the field. Only then can the thought be communicated optimally.

In order to achieve this, the thought should be comprehensible for all employees. This is more likely to be the case when the employees are involved in the actual process of shaping the thought. When they are given the opportunity to participate in feedback sessions they will be more likely to adopt the thought than in a situation where it is imposed upon them by some department head. Moreover, it will become easier to draw a link between the activities and work processes within the organisation, facilitating the translation of the thought to these activities. When this is done properly, employees will really be able to communicate the thought clearly to the outside world (Martens, 2015).

External Leadership

On an external level, it is important for the organisation to reach its stakeholders and even mobilise them with the innovative perspective. When this happens, the odds are the highest that the change desired by the organisation will be achieved.

Being inspiring is self-evident in both components of Leadership. Those who are truly leading are capable of creating a following of people who do not act because they are dominated but because they are truly being inspired. The followers will then act not because they have to, but because they want to (Sinek, 2009). This is why there is not a single hierarchical leader in thought leading organisations. The reason for this is that in practice, all employees are revolutionaries who help challenge the status quo (McCrimmon, 2005).

Parktheater Eindhoven is an organisation that inspires by actively working with organisations in different industries. The organisation offers new services and activities such as free working spaces, performances on location and an international supply on a large scale. Thanks to these activities, Parktheater Eindhoven's 'Thought' is communicated to a broader audience, and they are more likely to be seen as leading by external stakeholders as well. (This example will be further elaborated upon on page 11.)

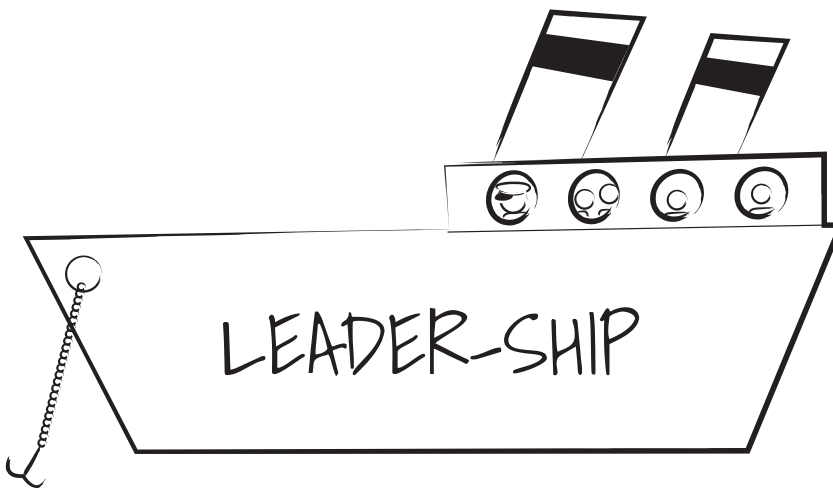
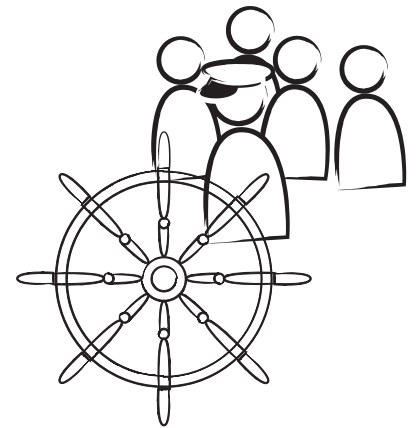
CONCEPTS

LEADERSHIP: 'Inspiring both internal and external stakeholders which will encourage them to rally behind the thought of the organisation and act accordingly.'

INTERN LEADERSHIP: 'Getting the internal stakeholders aligned with the thought that matches the identity of the organisation.'

EXTERN LEADERSHIP: 'Based on your thought, to be viewed by external stakeholders as a party with added social value, which also inspires these stakeholders to bring about the desired social change.'

In order to send the Thought, we obviously need a ship. Leadership now becomes a Leader-Ship. First of all, the crew members (internal stakeholders) should be aligned with the Thought. They should be motivated and all want to sail in the same direction, for the sake of the Thought they are shipping. This will be easier once they see their own role in the bigger picture. The better the internal alignment, the more prosperous the Leader-Ship will be. The more prosperous the Leader-Ship, the sooner external stakeholders will see the organisation as a party with an added value for society.



Thought leadership as a single term

After separating the components Thought and Leadership it is now time to 're-unite' them and examine them as a single term. Comparing different definitions of thought leadership can cause a lot of confusion. For this reason, it seems clearer to me to reveal which definition is in my opinion the most obvious and complete one. It is an pre-existing definition to which I have made a few additions.

CONCEPTS

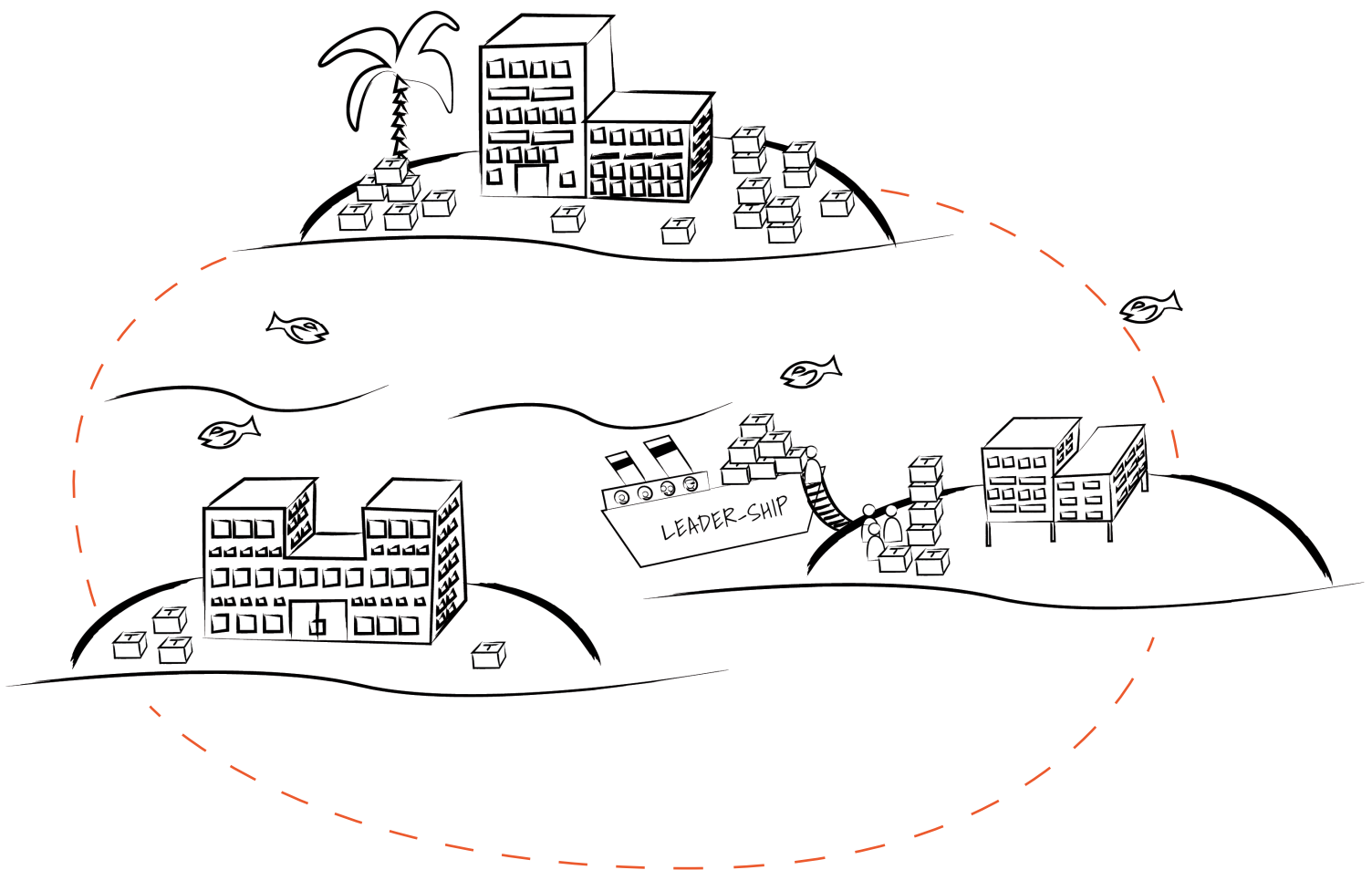
THOUGHT LEADERSHIP: To disseminate (in behaviour and communication) a Novel Point of View which enables stakeholders to take an innovative look at relevant themes, the objective of which is to offer them meaningful insights and solutions for their issues and problems.

Disseminating a Novel Point of View is central here, due to the fact that it is also the heart of the Thought. At this point I added 'in behaviour and communication', because this makes the dissemination slightly more concrete. Say what you do (communication), but be sure in particular to also do what you say (behaviour). When behaviour and communication are misaligned, the dissemination of the Novel Point of View will, in my opinion, fail.

Important to note is that the themes to which the Novel Point of View relates do not always have a direct connection to an organisation's products or services. They are often related to themes which transcend products and services, involving issues at the intersection of market and society (Van Halderen, Kettler-Paddock & Badings, 2013).

Thought leadership is also not something that you can claim as an organisation. You can earn it as a result of the trust you build with stakeholders. A true Thought Leader does not have the need to label himself as such. It is therefore not the word itself that attracts stakeholders, but the Novel Point of View and the trust which they build by translating this Novel Point of View to their activities and accomplishments (Van Halderen, Kettler-Paddock & Badings, 2013).

The organisation has loaded all the Thought-chests onto the Leader-Ship and the crew is ready for departure. The Leader-Ship sails on to different islands where external stakeholders are present. Upon arrival, several Thought-chests are unloaded. The stakeholders become interested when books and spectacles emerge from these chests. They read the books and try to see whether or not the spectacles give them a relevant new perspective. Some stakeholders react very positively and realise that this new perspective can help them solve their problems. When the Leader-Ship is ready to depart again, they ask the crew to visit them regularly. The crew responds to this request in the affirmative.



Why would an organisation want to be thought leading?

After this brief clarification of what thought leadership is, the question remains why an organisation would want to pursue a thought leadership strategy. Van Halderen, Kettler-Paddock & Badings (2013) offer two reasons for this.

Bringing about positive societal change

The most important reason a company would want to be thought leading is that thought leadership is a way of bringing about positive social changes. Unilever serves as a great example of this with its Sustainable Living Plan. This plan describes how Unilever aims to improve the lives of (all) people through truly sustainable solutions. Unilever does not put its shareholders first, but instead structures its organisation based on the social plan they have created. This does not mean that Unilever does not reap any financial returns. According to the organisation, this strategy will also yield good returns on investment for shareholders, but the word 'also' is leading here. It emphasises how Unilever's thought is the most important factor.

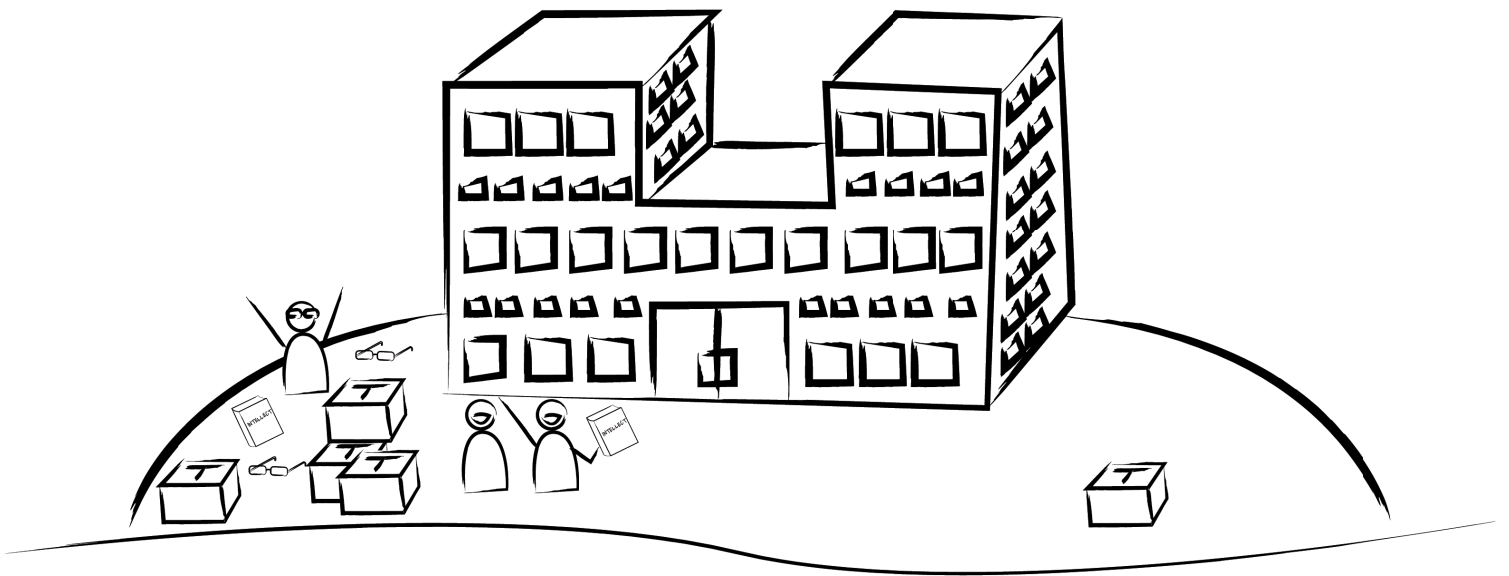
Another good example is the company Tony's Chocolonely. Tony's Chocolonely advocates 100% slave-labour free chocolate and to make sure it can give this guarantee, the company screens all production lines and suppliers. CEO Henk Jan Beltman indicates that making money is nearly always a goal in and of itself in business. In his view, when you know what your real goal is, money becomes a means to an end, not a goal. When, during the development phase of a new chocolate bar, Tony's Chocolonely was unable to determine the origin of the cranberries it needed, the organisation decided to discontinue the development of this new product. In acts such as this one, Tony's shows that it makes organisational choices based on its thought, even when this has negative financial consequences.

Profiling your organisation

An additional advantage of a thought leadership strategy is that you can use it to profile your organisation as a knowledge guru for a certain area of expertise. This is a way to secure or reinforce the position of the organisation for the future, especially today when it is becoming increasingly more difficult to differentiate based on product or price. The world is demanding change, and social change can be realised through the use of a strong thought. When translated to the strengths of an organisation, insights, knowledge and expertise become your USP.

In her book *Shifting Paradigms* (2015), Van Halderen points out that your motive is key in thought leadership. This can be either strategic or transformational. The strategic focus targets commercial goals whereas the transformational strategy aims to create social change. Particularly when it comes to the matter of stakeholder trust, I do not believe that a strategic focus will work in the end. Additionally, I hope that an organisation also considers its thought important enough, including when it comes to financial decisions. This is why I believe that the ability to bring about real change should always be given top priority together with thought leadership.

The external stakeholders are becoming ever more convinced of the content of the books and many of them continue to wear the spectacles. It helps them to see the world around them more the way they would like to see it and they get motivated to not only think differently, but also to act differently. This is the start of the change that the organisation wants to bring about.

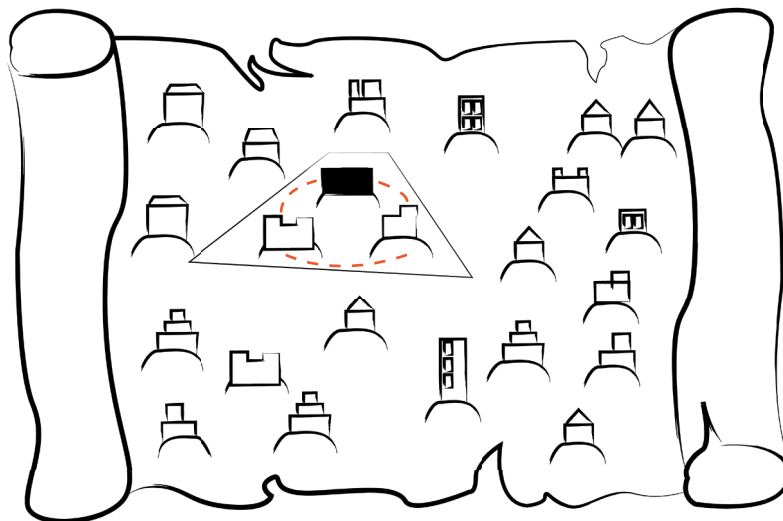


What is more important, the Thought or the Leadership?

It is difficult to say what is more important, the Thought or the Leadership. Before I started writing this paper I was convinced it was the Thought. I still believe that the Thought is what it is all about in thought leadership, as in the end it is the reason why stakeholders are interested in you, but I have come to realise that Leadership is required in order to be heard. The two aspects really need each other.

As indicated before, Leadership is crucial for the reach of the organisation. A relatively small organisation which is fairly unknown can in fact be a Thought Leader, without being acknowledged as such. The question remains how valuable it is for the organisation to be a Thought Leader when nearly no-one hears you. This is because without followers it is impossible to bring about any changes. When an organisation wants to be heard more it could be interesting for it to collaborate on a social level.

The organisation is happy that external stakeholders react enthusiastically, but realised that it can only sail in limited waters. Furthermore the Leader-Ship can only carry a limited number of Thought-chests. The real change fails to occur, but luckily the organisation has an idea to change that. They actively start looking for collaboration partners.



Collaborations on a social level

According to Van Halderen, et al. thought-leading organisations try to build trust by working in partnerships and by playing an important role in valuable networks (Van Halderen, Kettler-Paddock & Badings, 2013). They believe that leaders seek out consumers, NGOs, governments or industry experts to create and realise common goals. In my opinion, this list might be lacking the most important collaboration partner, namely another organisation, which is potentially also viewed as a Thought Leader. When you really stand behind your Thought and are determined to bring about changes, a collaboration between multiple organisations seems to me to be a great opportunity.

Cross-industrial collaboration

Thought leadership goes beyond just a specific market or sector (Van Halderen & Boyen). The thought transcends industries and serves a higher goal at a social level. It is quite possible that entirely different types of organisations have the same social goal. In my opinion, they could easily support the same Thought.

CASE / PARKTHEATER EINDHOVEN

A good example of an organisation that is already collaborating frequently with organisations in different industries is Parktheater Eindhoven. Giel Pastoor, the Parktheater director, indicates that the theatre's core business is not organising performances, but instead, it is to move people, to connect them and show them there is more to experience outside of their own little worlds. The Parktheater is there for the city of Eindhoven and wants to contribute to making the city a nicer place. Its own position is subordinate to the higher social goal.

Parktheater's perspective is therefore not focused solely on the world of theatre, but also on society as a whole. According to Pastoor, its task is to fulfil a leading role in the affective society; a society in which humans are central, inspire one another and allow themselves to be inspired. From the new energy and perspectives that arise from this, people will put forward solutions to the challenges of modern times.

Parktheater wants to inspire the people of Eindhoven and get them to inspire others by introducing them to different perspectives, tastes, colours, people, ideas and feelings. People can affect one another and the belief in this affective society could, when translated to the context of thought leadership, be labelled the Thought of the Parktheater. This Thought is a response to the belief in the 'makeability' of society. The makeable society could be viewed as the status quo, and the Parktheater wants to make the shift to a focus on society's 'affective capacity'.

To be able to mean more to the city and spread the Thought on a broader scale, the Parktheater works with many different organisations. These are further elaborated upon in text box 1. All these organisations work together with the Parktheater to achieve the goal to make society more affective.

Parktheater Eindhoven is a non-profit organisation, and a conscious choice was made for this example. The reasoning was that it is often for-profit-organisations that utilise a thought leadership strategy to secure their position in the market; the business goals often still take priority over the social goals. In a non-profit organisation, making a profit is not the primary goal and in my opinion, this is exactly what should apply to a Thought Leader when it really stands behind its Thought.

Pastoor indicates that making a profit is a good thing, and sometimes even necessary for the organisation, but that it is not a motive. In his view, the cold hard numbers are only part of the story. He illustrates this with a nice example. 'When a child leaves the theatre after a dance performance and tells her mother that she wants to dance just like that when she grows up,

then you are selling hope. Unfortunately, this not something you'll find in any annual report.' Aligned with its Thought, the Parktheater invests in people, both internally and externally. The organisation also actively seeks to collaborate with others and does not view them as competitors, but as partners in pursuit of change. For these reasons, I view Parktheater Eindhoven as a true Thought Leader.



Presteert imMENS



Parktheater Eindhoven works together with the following organisations to make society more affective.

SEATS2MEET

Seats2Meet is an organisation that believes in learning and sharing knowledge and facilitates creating connections between people. The Parktheater has offered its premises as a Seats2Meet co-working location. On working days, the theatre offers free workspaces and paid meeting rooms where people can learn from each other, share knowledge and inspire one another.

ERGON

Ergon provides development and mediation services for people with disadvantages in the employment market, helping them find work. For years now, the Parktheater has been hiring Ergon employees, particularly for postal delivery and cleaning services. This enables the theatre to offer them a chance to make the most of their strengths.

VITALIS WOONZORG GROEP

The Vitalis WoonZorg Groep is a care organisation that offers living, treatment and care services for senior citizens. The organisation's social and recreational offering places a great deal of attention on culture and the arts. In collaboration with the Parktheater, multiple performances are broadcast live in the Vitalis residences and common areas. Additionally, both organisations look for opportunities to set up joint productions, in which young producers are paired with Vitalis-directors and residents.

GGZE

GGzE offers help and support to people with special psychiatric problems. All care and support services are designed to enable people to take part in society to the best of their ability. The GGzE property includes a chapel and a theatre. There are plans to work with the Parktheater to examine possibilities for theatre, rental services, catering industry and productions with GGzE's clients. Performances by and for clients can then be put on in the theatre on location.

FONTYS UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES HRM & PSYCHOLOGY

The Fontys University for Applied Sciences HRM and Psychology Programme in Eindhoven has 'happiness' as an overarching theme. In 2015 the Parktheater and Fontys joined forces to start the initiative 'Happiness for Eindhoven': a



week full of cultural and educational activities centred on this theme. Within the scope of this initiative, the organisations went in search of ‘happiness spots’ in Eindhoven in both 2015 and 2016: 11 special places in the city that make people happy. For the 2016 edition, a few new partners joined in, namely the Muziekgebouw Eindhoven, Natlab and the Van Abbe Museum.

NHTV BREDA

Together with the NHTV in Breda, Parktheater works on the creation of knowledge on theatre, programming, guest services and having an effect on people. Students of the NHTV and Parktheater employees work together to research future scenarios for the theatre.

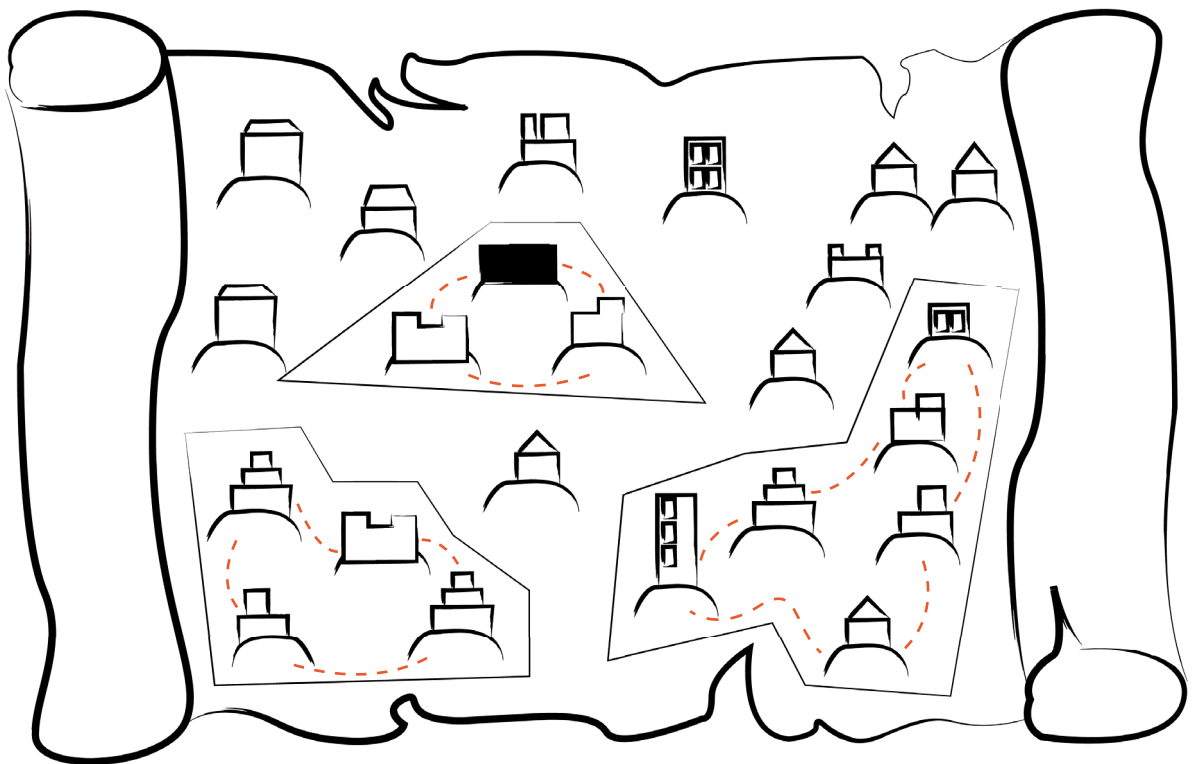
SUMMA COLLEGE AND SINTLUCAS

The Parktheater works with teachers and students of the Summa College and the SintLucas secondary school in a variety of areas. Students of the Summa College were asked to create and organise activities for different youth performances, where students were allowed to shape productions, supervised by Parktheater employees. For several years now, SintLucas students have been taking practical courses on stage and event technology. This offers the students the opportunity to develop professional connections to young theatre guests and multiple technical specialists.

MAJOR CONCERT HALLS IN BRABANT

Together with the larger concert halls in the province of Brabant, the Parktheater tries to continue to offer a broad range of international performances. With all the expats in the area, the responses to these performances are very enthusiastic. International performances also offer the potential for great new perspectives.

With the help of the collaboration partners that have been found, the Leader-Ship has increased in size. It can travel greater distances and ship more Thought-chests. It must do this since the waters it can sail in have increased dramatically in size. The collaboration partners' immediate environments can now be reached. Together with its partners, the organisation has published a second edition of the book and increased the strength of the spectacles' lenses. Bringing about the desired changes now only appears to be a matter of time.



Why should organisations collaborate?

The collaborations the Parktheater is involved in offer a number of important advantages. These advantages are not just valid for this specific theatre, but for all organisations that are considering starting various forms of collaboration.

Expanding essential resources

Essential resources for change and renewal are time, money and people (Van Halderen & Boyen). When organisations work together they naturally have more of each of these resources at their disposal. More time can be spent on matters that support the Thought, more money is available and there are more people that can be deployed.

Reach & conversational force grow

The conversational force of your organisation is actually always important, but particularly when there is a focus on social change, it is a concept that should not be underestimated. The more your organisation is able to act as a sounding board and benchmark in conversations with stakeholders and is able to show how the perspective has been translated to concrete solutions, the greater the reflexive effect. Stakeholders will want to speak to you because of your refreshing insights, knowledge and expertise (Van Halderen & Boyen). Here again it applies that your conversational force will be greater when you work with others than alone. Organisations with entirely different groups of stakeholders can now reach all of these and start conversations with them.

An expansion of the essential resources of time, money and people will in many cases lead to a greater reach. More reach will increase the chances that the perspective catches on and eventually therefore also yields actual changes. Figure 1 shows this effect in the form of an illustration.

Figure 1



Learning from each other

Giel Pastoor indicates that keeping each other sharp might well be the most important reason for collaboration. 'By watching and listening to others you might get ideas that you never would have had otherwise, or perspectives which you might never have seen. When your organisation is very different from another one, there is particularly high potential to learn a great deal from one another.'

In addition, when you collaborate, there are opportunities to research topics together that complement or improve your Intellect. You can also take a more critical look at your Novel Point of View when you do this with multiple parties, helping you to limit the chances of tunnel vision. Both of these developments are really beneficial to the Thought in my opinion.

True Thought Leaders

As I have mentioned previously, thought leadership is, in my opinion, not a goal in and of itself, but a means to an end. I believe that the final goal should always be the realisation of change. The reason for this is that your Thought is what makes you appealing to stakeholders and that Thought stimulates a certain change.

In order to bring about change, it is important for as many people as possible to hear you. This can be a problem for smaller organisations in particular. I believe that cross-industrial collaboration between organisations offers an excellent opportunity to improve this.

Essential resources in thought leadership strategies are time, money and people. When organisations work together, they have more of all these resources. In addition, the reach is now much greater and due to the diversity in organisations, entirely different (stakeholder) groups are involved. Finally, the different organisations can learn a lot from each other and keep one another sharp where needed. All these advantages increase the chances that the renewing perspective will catch on and therefore also the chance of achieving the desired change.

Thought leadership starts at the core of an organisation, the place where motivation is also found. The motivation to bring about change with your Thought is, in my view, the most important criterion for considering an organisation to be a Thought Leader. An organisation with mainly financial motivations is, in my opinion, also not a true Thought Leader.

A true Thought Leader therefore does not strive to achieve absolute power just to promote their own organisation. A true Thought Leader looks for collaborative partnerships to really bring about change. So look around you, find the right collaboration partners and make the difference, because together you are stronger than you are alone.

Together with its collaboration partners the organisation has achieved a result which they could never have accomplished on their own. The change they envisioned has been realised. It is not certain whether they all lived long lives, but they did all live happily ever after.

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