

By Robert L. Jolles

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME you were engaged in a conversation and at a loss for words? During a meeting with an important client, did you ever think to yourself, “I wish I could have thought of a better response to that question”?

These scenarios happen frequently, and that leads to one of the most common questions: “Are we born with the ability to make quick mental responses or can quick thinking be learned?”

For years, too many of us have thought of quick thinking as some kind of genetic bonus. Most people feel you either have it or you don’t. It’s an interesting theory, and certainly makes it a lot easier to accept our fate if we aren’t one of the lucky ones, but there’s only one problem with that theory: It’s wrong.

How do you speed up your ability to think quickly on your feet? That’s easy: Think faster!

**Improvisation**

What we need to do is train the mind to think faster. After watching a television show “Whose Line is it Anyway,” I marveled at the speed of the responses that the actors on stage demonstrated. I then began to wonder, “Are those people born that way, or did they acquire this mental speed as a learned behavior?”

That’s where my research began. For more than a year, I studied the art of improvisational acting. Although teaching an actor to move through peanut butter was an interesting concept and might expand one’s creativity, I also knew that the average businessperson would never warm up to such an exercise.

As I continued to interview directors and actors from multiple improvisational troops, I expected them to tell me the wonderful gift they had—the gift of reacting quickly and creatively. Interestingly enough, not once did I ever hear any of them say that what they had was a gift. Instead, the actors told

# Think Fast!

**How to think**

**on your feet.**

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me repeatedly that the more they performed as an improvisational actor, the better they got at it.

The directors went a step further. They told me they used various drills to improve their actors’ abilities to improvise. Consequently, the more the actors performed these activities, the better they performed.

Although, I found plenty of books that taught improvisational exercises, none of them tied these exercises to business practices or the business processes we use in the workplace everyday. What

good is quick thinking if you have no process to attach it to?

**Anatomy of a conversation**

So, how exactly does someone speed up their ability to think quickly on their feet? To figure this out, you must first look at the anatomy of a conversation.

In short, conversations start with an introduction—as the commercial states, you only have one chance to make a first impression. That one chance usually boils down to 45 seconds. Think about your introduction: How much do you want the person to really know about you and when do you want her to know it?

Trust also is a major component of conversations. It is important to earn the trust of the person you are speaking with because without trust, the conversation will not last long. Ask questions—lots of them—and be prepared to listen. Don’t ask questions that can be answered with yes-or-no responses. You can control an entire conversation by the questions you ask.

After trust is established, the goal of many conversations often centers on creating change. Learn how to create urgency in your conversations, and you’ll create change.

With most conversations there is an unknown. How do you cope with the unknown in a conversation? What if someone objects to your ideas? How do you buy yourself some time to think before answering a question? A good process teaches techniques that give us the best chance for success, but does not guarantee it. That means that processes need to address scenarios that incorporate objections and other forms of challenges that inevitably come up in a conversation.

Every step of a conversation has a solution—repeatable, predictable techniques can be measured and fixed.

For each problem, there is a process, and for each process, there are exercises that help the mind rehearse and practice

its ability to think and react faster. Some of us might begin with a head start, but with practice, anyone can improve their ability to react quicker on their feet.

## Practice, practice, practice

Coaches always say, "Practice makes perfect." Athletes practice so they can pre-

pare themselves to handle all situations. The same concept applies to thinking quickly on your feet. You can't expect to be good at it if you don't prepare your brain to think quicker.

To think faster, you have to improve your opening statements and develop conversational skills by learning how to

react to stupid questions, develop questions, gain trust, think creatively, and avoid confrontational situations.

Like anything you do, preparation is critical. How can you think creatively unless you practice being creative?

With the right practice, anyone can improve his mental agility.

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## Exercises to Improve Your Thinking

**Thinking outside the box requires speed and creativity.** One exercise that will challenge your creativity takes only 15 minutes of your time. Find three objects and write down as many words as you can to describe it without calling it what it is. Record your ideas on a piece of paper. Limit your work with each item to five minutes.

**Starting a conversation can be an overwhelming experience.** One exercise that will help you prepare to start a conversation takes about 20 minutes of your time. On a sheet of paper, write down a greeting, initial benefit statement, process, time, and opening tactic that you would use to have a conversation with someone you have never met.

**Asking and answering questions quickly are vital to thinking fast.** With a partner, take turns asking and answering questions. Limit your role play to one minute. When a question is asked, answer it as quickly as possible.

Source: *Mental Agility*