

# HOW EFFECTIVE THINKING HABITS HELP LEADERS TO BE MORE EFFECTIVE

*Sandy Seeber-Quayle*

// It is super busy.” This is the most common answer when asking someone how work is. Many professionals expand on their frustration of not being listened to, not feeling appreciated, having little time for strategic topics, and a younger generation that has a different attitude to work. The pressure for results is mounting, risks are increasing, and talent is either hard to find or moves on too quickly. Remote and hybrid working has changed how leaders communicate with their teams. Prominent topics such as inclusion, diversity, and equity have increased the already high expectations for people in charge to develop their emotional intelligence, overcome their biases, and act as mentors to instill creative and critical thinking.

In the meantime, fast-developing AI technologies, an ever-increasing risk of cybersecurity, and a need for organizations to stay relevant add further complexity. Leaders across all levels feel like they have to do more

to keep getting effective results. But even though they push themselves and others harder than ever, outcomes stay below expectations while burnout levels keep increasing.

In her seminal work on psychological safety, Harvard Business School Professor of Leadership and Management Amy Edmondson writes about how people need to feel safe to speak up. University of Virginia Darden School of Business Professor of Business Administration Jim Detert suggests that the deeply engrained rules within organizations need to be challenged before change can occur.

Megan Reitz, Associate Fellow, Saïd Business School, Oxford University and Adjunct Professor of Leadership and Dialogue at Hult International Business School, who has researched the perceptions of power, asks leaders to give their people permission to pause and notice. A call to step off the machinery that has people do what they have always done. Stepping off anything

moving is difficult. Even more so, when changes are happening fast in our VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) world, which has already become more of what futurist Jamais Cascio describes as a BANI world—brittle, anxious, nonlinear, and incomprehensible.

These challenges faced by individuals ripple through to the core of organizations and have an even broader impact on our communities, our trust in safety, and the systems we have come to rely on. To avoid future collateral damage, we need a solution that addresses the root issues without challenging the status quo. What we need to achieve behavioral change is a way that helps us interrupt our automatic thinking and form effective thinking habits.

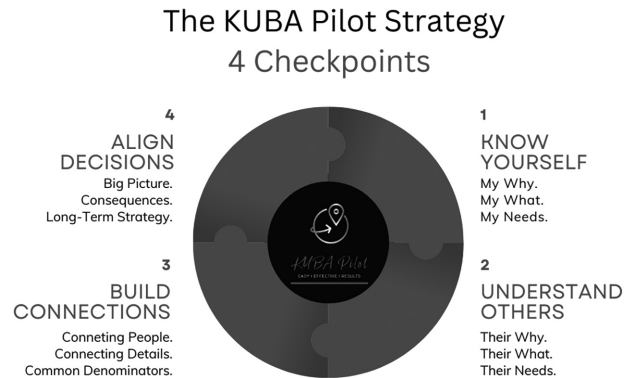
One strategy to cultivate such effective thinking habits is the KUBA Pilot Strategy.

## The KUBA Pilot Strategy

The KUBA Pilot Strategy first emerged during an interview for a people development role where I presented my approach to training new managers. Drawing on my experience in results and management-related positions, my observations of diverse teams, and working with people from various backgrounds and cultures, I identified four core principles for managerial success: self-awareness, empathy, analytical skills, and strategic alignment.

To validate these principles, which formed the basis for the KUBA Pilot Strategy, I accepted an opportunity as an operations manager and succeeded within a high-paced, complex organizational setup in a highly regulated industry and challenging business partner relationships. My effectiveness in building trusting relationships, delivering objectives, and finding solutions within constraints led not only to recognition but also to a promotion. The strategy further evolved through my study of organizational behavior, which provided a strong theoretical foundation.

KUBA Pilot suggests a systematic approach to directing our thinking through four key checkpoints: Know Yourself, Understand Others, Build Connections, and



**FIGURE 1. THE KUBA PILOT STRATEGY 4 CHECKPOINTS**

Align Decisions, as shown in Figure 1. This framework serves as a strategic thinking tool, balancing a focus on self with consideration for others and attention to detail with a broader perspective. Instead of prescribing how to think about a problem and the people involved, it fosters the exploration of various angles and viewpoints for each aspect of a problem in the context of desired outcomes, cultivating a more flexible and comprehensive problem-solving approach.

It reinforces the understanding that there is always more to learn, encourages embracing different perspectives, emphasizes thorough analysis of details and data, and underscores the importance of considering long-term consequences in decision-making. A strategy to help leaders navigate and empower their teams to work on effective solutions in line with an organization's core values, long-term strategy, and mission—thereby helping everyone succeed.

Using this strategy is easy and effective. It requires little else except for stopping at each of the checkpoints to ensure nothing is missed when taking next steps. Let's

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have a closer look at how this strategy can be applied in practice.

### **The Problem to Solve as the Starting Point**

The starting point is a problem to solve; a clear objective that drives you forward. This can be for example about a required system change that will enhance functionality. Before jumping to the conclusion of what would be the best way to move forward, considering the checkpoints of the KUBA Pilot Strategy helps you to not only find the most effective solution, but also provides an opportunity to further build on your management skills.

#### **Checkpoint 1: Know Yourself**

The first checkpoint is “Know Yourself.” Now is the time to take note of all your thoughts about the problem. These are the conclusions you made, the thoughts you are having without much thinking. But this is also about why is it important to you to solve this problem, and what happens when you don’t. Ask yourself, what you can do, what you need to know, and who can help you. List the next steps.

This checkpoint helps you to recognize how you feel about the problem, clarifies the importance for you to solve it, and sets your intention to take the next steps from a collected frame of mind that ideally wonders about the perspective of other relevant people.

In the example of a system change, you want to check what you already know about the change, what your thoughts are, and your doubts. You want to consider

questions such as: Who will be on the team to deliver the system change? What do you know about them, and how does this information help you move forward? Furthermore, you want to be clear about the consequences for you, the team, and the company if the system change is not delivered within the required budget, timeframe, and defined requirements. Last but not least, you want to take note of what you are unsure of.

Essentially, this first checkpoint draws from the power of self-awareness. It gives us a good understanding of our motivations and fears. It also helps us realize how our values are at play, what is at stake, and what we think about ourselves and others. When we take a moment to identify what we already know and how this is relevant to the context of our problem, we recognize our own stance. For some, this comes naturally, while others have a strong focus on other people, possibly underestimating their own ideas and motivations. Using this checkpoint ensures that we pause and gain clarity about our own thinking, aiding us in determining what we need to do next.

#### **Checkpoint 2: Understand Others**

The second checkpoint “Understand Others” builds on what you already know about the problem. However, instead of trying to merely verify that your assumptions are right, this checkpoint reminds you to seek an understanding of what others think about this

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problem and related issues. This checkpoint requires you to act by seeking conversations with relevant people on your team or others impacted by the problem as well as colleagues from other departments who may need to be involved at some point to progress toward a solution.

For example, the system change may have you speak with people from different departments to identify relevant processes and risks to include in the scope. A system user may bring to your attention an issue or manual workaround that needs to be investigated further. An accountant may give insights on how the timing of system-issued reporting affects their objectives. Perhaps, this leads you to identify an opportunity to reduce costs by combining this system change with another technical implementation already on the plan.

You want to start with an open mind. This can be challenging if you have had previous experiences with a person you need to consult for input. Such experiences may increase or decrease the weight of their input, no matter how helpful it may be. One way that can help overcome preconceptions about a person is to establish a problem-related overlap between you and another and then look for potential solutions. This way, you allow your thinking to be more focused on working on the solution, bypassing potential preconceptions you may have. Another way to help you be more curious about what other people can add is by approaching another with wonder about their challenges, their perspective, or simply what new you could learn.

By seeking to understand others, information becomes available that we may have missed otherwise. At the same time, we invite participation in the problem-solving process, which gives others meaning. Moreover, it ignites in them a sense of being recognized, a type of recognition that lands way deeper than saying, “Thank you.”

This checkpoint essentially helps you to further develop your empathy as a result of going beyond your own view and considering the perspectives of others in the pursuit of effective problem-solving and collaboration.

## Checkpoint 3: Build Connections

Once you have a better understanding of other people’s perspectives, you can start looking for a common denominator and identify options to move forward. This checkpoint is related to analytical thinking by working together with the team in analyzing and checking details, connecting dots, and finding synergies between what is required to solve the problem and what others need to solve it. You now can narrow down your options based on what you have learned.

In our example of the system change, you may have identified an issue with the business requirements after consulting relevant stakeholders and team members. Let’s say, an important requirement has been missed. Without including it, the system change would fall short of expected outcomes and by including this requirement, the milestones won’t be reached within the scope of resources allocated. What decision would you make?

We tend to look for a pros and cons list when we have to decide between two options, narrowing our thinking to whatever information is readily available. This checkpoint reminds us to examine all the details and brainstorm with the team about what other options are available, no matter how favorable they may be. Practical ways to guide through this step could include walking through each stage of the current and envisioned user journey, exploring how a similar problem within another system or process has been resolved, or ranking system outputs based on their criticality and material importance.

This checkpoint is about connecting all the data we have, including what we already know about the current system, our experiences from other unrelated projects, and what we have learned from others. When we analyze the details and brainstorm with others, we identify common denominators, essentially building and strengthening connections among the facts and the people in the team, promoting shared understanding and effective collaboration.

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## *The fourth checkpoint is related to the bigger picture.*

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From here, we can narrow down our options to choose the best path forward. But before making a decision, remind yourself of the last checkpoint.

### **Checkpoint 4: Align Decisions**

The fourth checkpoint is related to the bigger picture. This is the strategic thinking checkpoint that helps you make decisions that not only solve your problem now but also ensure that the solution supports the long-term strategy. Here you want to check for consequences, risks, and other impacts that are beyond solving the issues at hand. A straightforward solution can cause new issues later, impacting future initiatives. Equally, a solution that needs more time to implement and exceeds the budget may solve several issues that have been compromising the progress of other strategic projects.

With reference to the system change, you want to ensure that your preferred proposed solution solves not only your problem but also aligns with the company strategy and avoids causing other issues. For instance, the new functionality eliminates a time delay in a customer journey process, enabling quicker responses to customer queries. This, in turn, increases productivity and customer satisfaction, aligning well with the company's strategy of providing great customer experience. However, you may also identify a risk: removing this time delay could impact other processes or controls not yet considered. Envisioning how options, once implemented, behave and fit into the organization as a whole helps choosing the most effective solution.

A pragmatic approach for this checkpoint could be a table of opposites. Begin by assessing the impact of your preferred option on the organization, its strategic objectives, and long-term goals. In the first column, list the benefits, and in the second column, the consequences and impacts. Ideally, persist in asking “what else” until you have added three or more points to each side that didn't come immediately to mind.

Aligning decisions involves ensuring support for the broader strategy while considering future anticipated challenges and scaling aspirations, preventing unwanted consequences. This ensures that decisions lead to lasting and effective results.

### **A Continuous Process**

Although the four checkpoints may seem like a linear, step-by-step method, they form more of a continuous circle, as illustrated in Figure 1: The KUBA Pilot Strategy 4 Checkpoints. These checkpoints help interrupt our automatic thinking, prompting a conscious effort to notice what else needs to be considered. In conversations with others, you might gain new information that reminds you of an experience or triggers an emotional response. This may prompt you to consider one or all of those four checkpoints there and then. Each checkpoint enhances your effectiveness by balancing your preferences, experiences, strengths, and weaknesses with those of others.

In my experience, we all already have thinking patterns that work well. To make them more effective, it is important to focus on the checkpoints that we tend to forget about. I have worked with managers who had a great eye for detail but needed to enhance their bigger-picture thinking. Once they developed their strategic thinking using the Align Decision checkpoint, they not only achieved more effective results but also gained recognition from senior management. Others, who were more adept at strategic thinking but lacked consideration for detail, found that “Build Connection” helped them see the value of delving a little deeper into details. This earned them not only more effective results but also more respect from their teams.



The same is true for the first two checkpoints. Some people are other-focused, while others are more interested in pushing their own ideas. Neither is an issue. However, if we want to get effective results in complex and fast-paced environments, we need to collaborate with others, allowing ourselves and others to work together, drawing from combined experiences and diverse perspectives.

By regularly using the checkpoints of the KUBA Pilot Strategy when solving problems or working toward objectives, the brain eventually forms new pathways. These are further reinforced by the experience of effective outcomes and people being invested in creating such outcomes based on their feeling valued and appreciated. These successful experiences reaffirm the new pathways and, over time, establish them as effective thinking habits.

## Conclusion

Developing effective thinking habits promises to help us navigate constant change in a complex and diverse working environment by keeping us flexible in our response to problems and challenges that arise. Effective thinking strategies help us to balance the most critical skills for effective leadership now and in the future. Such strategies support us in creating space that allows for pausing and noticing without compromising results. With this, we build an environment where people feel safe to speak up, and, over time, transform the deeply engrained rules within organizations.

Using the KUBA Pilot Strategy as an effective thinking strategy, leaders have an opportunity to foster effective thinking habits that empower them to remain calm, overcome biases, and enhance relationships. Furthermore, the development of effective thinking habits strengthens self-confidence, helps grow emotional intelligence, and cultivates critical thinking—essentially supporting personal and professional development to become the most effective leader they can be.



*Sandy Seeber-Quayle brings over two decades of leadership experience from managing and developing insurance businesses, navigating complex technical landscapes, and fostering collaborative partnerships from working for companies such as Apple, Aegon, and CNP Santander Insurance.*

*Throughout her career, Sandy has trained and coached professionals in key skills from product knowledge, sales methodologies, effective communication, and guiding individuals into management roles. She holds a degree in Insurance, a Diploma in Organizational Behavior from the Irish Management Institute, and certifications in Train the Trainer and Executive Coaching. Specializing in organizational behavior, Sandy actively promotes critical thinking, problem-solving, and effective communication.*