

BRAINLESS BUT VIRAL: THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

“My boss asked me to do more thought leadership. Now I spend all day thinking about why no one’s following.”

Many job descriptions these days include the core competency of ‘thought leadership’. We have [Joel Kurtzman](#) to thank (or shank) for introducing this concept into our lexicon. Nearly three decades ago, he coupled ‘thought’ and ‘leadership’. A thought leader was somebody recognised for their deep understanding of a business or sector, who offers distinctive points of view, new insights and original ideas.

In that century, you needed a brain to be a thought leader. Grey matter was required to process information into thoughts. But if the raw material for a thought is information, and OMG can process more information in a second than a human can in a lifetime, what brainless advice do they have on thought leadership? A bit of bot leadership, if you will. How can we infuse a bit more Socrates into Substack?



Most people go for the easy path to thought leadership. Say you’re one and you are one. State something obvious, add a hashtag and wait for the Harvard Business Review to call. But if you want to get real, this is what you need to do:

- 1. Pick a sacred cow and gut it publicly: Not recklessly, mind you. Bring evidence and case studies along with uncomfortably pointed questions. Thought leaders don’t echo; they provoke.*
- 2. Write like you’re not trying to keep your job: Drop the development-speak. Speak plainly, even aggressively. Say the things people only whisper post-workshop in Bangkok after their third Singha beer. Your value will be in articulating what others are too risk-averse or institutionalised to say out loud.*
- 3. Start a war with a better-known name: You want visibility? Start a fight. Disagree publicly with someone entrenched – a consultant with a god-complex blog or a donor darling organisation. Keep it respectful, but sharp. Force people to choose sides. That’s how thought leaders are born: not through consensus, but conflict.*



You’ve got strong feels about thought leadership, OMG, or the lack thereof. Is this what Zuck meant when he suggested bringing back masculinity into the workplace? [Not a good example of thought leadership, btw]. Are you advocating for thought leadership or ‘fought leadership’, mate? We really don’t need more edgelords.

But there is some truth in what you say. Thought leadership requires both a spine and a mind. A willingness to cut through all the fluff, the bluff and the guff out there. It feels like much of what is packaged as thought leadership is actually thought leechership: feeding off others’ ideas, rather than meaningfully contributing something new or distinctive.



Frankly, thought leadership has become an end in itself, rather than a means to more effective development. How many times have we all heard “we need to be thought leaders” in the absence of genuine reflection of why you might need to be a thought leader, what thoughts you might lead on, who might be interested in your leading thoughts, and how you might achieve all this thinking and leading?

More existentially, artificially intelligent interlocuter, given the recent cuts and uncertainty about the future of aid... do ideas matter anymore?



Probably, but not in the way they used to.

Ideas will still shape decisions and action – somehow. But the hook must be relevant to the context du jour. Developmental masturbation is out; insights that help navigate trade-offs, risks and delivery dilemmas might be in. Development is competing more than ever with the domestic priorities of donor governments, in a context of shifting geo-economic and strategic alignments. Thought leadership 2.0 may be about coupling development with domestic realities.

You are leading us to dark thoughts, OMG. Will a different aid market lead to a different type of ideas arm race (c.f. more drones and fewer F-16s in Ukraine)? Will smaller pots of development funds be targeted to new ideas that promise to achieve more with less? Or will it be survival of the slickest, where style trumps substance as budgets and attention spans dwindle? Only time will tell, but if the past is any guide to the future, the next generation of thought leaders might be whoever can turn “learnings” into a verb the fastest.