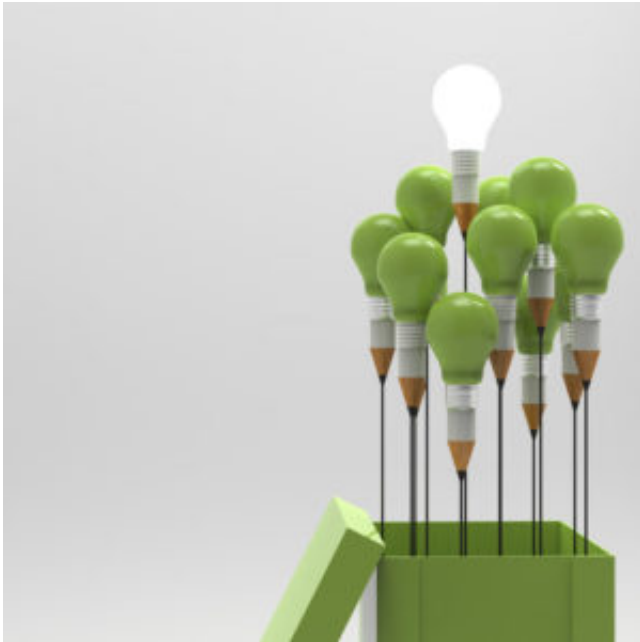


What Does It Take to Be a Thought Leader?

Featured in the January 2020 edition of the [Edge International Communiqué](#)

By Bithika Anand



We often come across the term ‘thought leader.’ Many of us wonder what is implied by this term, and how one might embark upon the journey of being recognized as one. Contrary to popular belief, those at the pinnacle of their professional journeys or those who are visionaries do not automatically become thought leaders. It is only when they are recognized by others in their particular fields for their expertise, authenticity of information, novelty of ideas and authority of opinions that they can be called ‘thought leaders’. Such individuals require passion for building a network of influencers, consistency in the steering of knowledge initiatives, and the ability to take a stance on issues pertaining to areas of specialization.

In this article, we discuss the role of thought leaders, and what it takes to be on the path of thought leadership.

Who is a ‘Thought Leader’?

A thought leader is an individual who is recognized as having authority in a specific field or area of practice, whose skill and expertise is renowned and sought. This person has proven authority in a specialized area, and is highly regarded by those who wish to excel in that area. Thought leaders are known for being pioneers or for being revolutionary in their thinking, with the ability to intellectually influence the lives of those who are a part of the ecosystem surrounding the area of their expertise.

Choose your Area of Expertise

Just as no great task is accomplished without a plan and a clear vision, becoming a thought leader in a legal field requires clarity of thought. Thought leaders choose an area of expertise and stick to it, rather than attempting to gain experience and disseminate knowledge in every practice area or industry sector. Those who wish to be recognized in future as thought leaders in the field of intellectual property rights (IPR), for example, do not normally need to delve into developments in other fields (say, taxation or insolvency). However, if there are taxation nuances that may affect transactional work in intellectual property, they need to be well-versed in those areas.

Thought leaders may also be more specific in the area of their expertise than others — choosing, for example, niche fields within

the IPR practice (trademarks, copyrights or patents, for instance). Whatever the choice, thought leaders must focus on augmenting knowledge in the area they've chosen and deepen their skills. Instead of widening the base of their practice across several areas, they will need to dive deeply in a chosen area and understand the allied or complementary areas. When they have direct experience and expertise in a particular area, their chances of being looked up to and followed are robust.

Being the 'Go-To' Person Is the First Step

As mentioned above, thought leadership requires consistent demonstration of expertise, exposure and experience in a practice area or an industry sector. An impressive body of work, comprised of years of successful cases, matters, transactions, opinions and legal work are necessary, but these are not enough. Internally, would-be thought leaders need to become the 'go-to' person within their organization; externally, they need to become 'trusted advisors' to clients, academia, judiciary, peers, competitors and students.

And yet this is only the first step. Thought leadership is more than execution, service-delivery and rainmaking. Thought leadership occurs when you develop and share informative content curated or drawn from your expertise and experience – influencing the relevant industry sector, and not just a few specific clients. Thought leaders involve themselves in initiatives that impact the fraternity as a whole and build credibility through deliberate involvement in issues of larger interest, not all of which are driven by commercial interests. Over a period of time, their opinions and insights are almost considered 'sacred' owing to the weight and gravitas they carry. In short, the transition from a go-to person or a trusted advisor to becoming an 'influencer' is the first stage in the journey toward thought leadership.

Knowledge Dissemination and Engagement

You're a thought leader when people start following you, and this 'following' is not just subscribing to or following your social media pages. This 'following' means that like-minded professionals start aligning with you owing to path-breaking legal work, and your ability to get involved with the business sector in decision-making. Other initiatives include disseminating knowledge through erudite articles, thought papers and participation in government initiatives and policy-making. It is relatively easy in the age of social media to demonstrate one's expertise through blogs, social-media profiles and online publications. However, effort needs to be made to combine an understanding of the law with economic trends and evolving jurisprudence.

Thought leadership also includes engaging with stakeholders from an area at a more strategic level, enabling the perception-builders to believe in your expertise even when you do not deal with them professionally. Thought leaders make an attempt to share views on the latest economic, legal and social developments. They utilize a network of followers and collaborators to connect with those who are involved in creating federal regulations, and they are invited to make submissions representing their suggestions and viewpoints towards legislative developments. They can also strike a chord with their followers by simplifying statutes and legal jargon, and extending help on a pro-bono basis. Actively engaging with others in the legal sector by way of initiating discussions, answering questions, providing guidance and exchanging valuable information goes a long way toward establishing intellectual prowess as a thought leader.

Beyond 'Networking'

Thought leadership requires one to go beyond "networking" – i.e., establishing relationships for reasons other than mutual commercial benefit. It involves building relationships in advance of when you may actually need them. There is no scorecard of mutual give-and-take, but an earnest effort to trust the synergy amongst the network of one's contacts. This facilitates information-exchange and the sharing of ideas among those with a common interest in an area of practice. It also allows individuals to be in touch with contacts and other thought leaders, which enables an exchange of valuable information not necessarily available outside of the network.

Knowledge Insights

Through engagement and dialogue with legal professionals and industry leaders, thought leaders consciously keep themselves updated with what's happening in the economy, their area of practice and the industry sector(s) they serve, which allows them to learn about legal, sectoral and economic developments. However, while participating in events and discussion forums with other thought leaders is one of the ways to hear and be a part of the voice of the fraternity, voracious reading and investing time in research are also imperative, irrespective of the stage in one's professional journey. Insights based on credible research and gathered from a network of reliable sources from the fraternity lend trustworthiness to the content of thought leaders, giving them authoritative voices.

Thought leaders align themselves with forums specific to their practice area or industry sector and participate in relevant

initiatives, from events to publications. This gives them an upper hand, as all those connected with an industry sector seek access to information before they get to the decision-making stage, especially when such decision-making pertains to high-stakes matters or big-ticket business decisions. At this stage, people reach out to thought leaders for authenticity of information and authority of opinions, rather than seeking only service delivery.

Summing Up

Thought leadership is a tool of differentiation from others in one's field. Starting from providing a legal perspective on business issues, thought leaders transcend towards engaging with the broader legal community. They influence not just their clients, but also those who form a part of the fraternity, including in-house counsels and legal-team members, C-suite executives, service providers to the legal fraternity, members of the judiciary and academia including students, teachers, etc.

Thought leaders enter into strategic relationships with other influencers and also draw from their experience, audience, peers and followers. Along with sharing substantial amounts of value-added content, they need to get themselves involved in issues pertaining to their areas of practice and industry sectors, which may involve taking a stance that supports or condemns a view.

Most importantly, learning is continuous process for thought leaders. They are always required to be on top of their game, keeping up with the latest trends and exploring new ideas.
