The Four Elements of Thought Leadership

Thought Leadership Leverage

thought
leadership
leverage

How do I build out my thought leadership?

What are the key components to successful thought leadership?

How do I attract more followers, gain reputation, and make an impact?

Is there a framework to focus thought leadership activity for myself or in my organization?

What's the most effective way to monetize thought leadership?

Executive Summary

Thought leadership has long been a phrase to describe any number of activities from well-intentioned authors, speakers, marketers, and educators; however, it has lacked a structured definition and framework to help those who consider themselves "thought leaders" improve their craft.

Thought Leadership Leverage (TLL) - a firm specializing in thought leadership consulting - has defined the key elements of thought leadership to not only improve their offerings and services, but also codify what good thought leadership should and does look like.

As a thought leader consultant working with hundreds of thought leaders, including completing systematic reviews of their work, TLL has identified four elements that serve as the foundation for effective thought leadership:

- **Ideas** - the core insights that get someone to say: "Aha! Now I see things differently." You can typically state an idea in a single sentence.

- **Platform** - a concise 2-3 word statement that introduces your thought leadership and captures attention.

- **Content** - your entire library of stories, examples, and data. Content brings your ideas to life.

- **Offerings** - the ways in which people encounter and experience thought leadership.

Who Are Thought Leaders?

Over the years, TLL has worked with a variety of individuals and organizations that are thought leaders or create thought leadership. While every individual gets into thought leadership for different reasons, certain patterns emerge:

CEOs who want to use thought leadership to create opportunities for the business and open doors for their sales teams;

In-house gurus who have deep domain expertise and who are often responsible for: a) looking into the future and describing the world that will be to clients and prospects b) transferring their expert knowledge within and across a large (often global) organization;

Marketing teams who want to use a unique approach to traditional and content marketing, public relations, and brand communication to generate leads;

Business and organizational leaders looking to leave a legacy and lasting mark with their experience and passion; and

Independent thought leaders (speakers, authors, consultants and others) who are at various points of their life and career - looking to monetize and evangelize their unique insights and content.

For anyone that fits these descriptions, thought leadership is a craft. The goal should be to improve, gain skill, and increase leverage.

By looking at thought leadership through the lens of the elements, these individuals will have a more complete picture of where they are and where they should focus their time, attention, resources, and energy.

Introduction

While we may think of the terms "thought leader" and "thought leadership" as modern concepts, they are much older. The term "thought leader" traces back to the 19th century. An early use of the term "thought leader" in 1876 describes American philosopher and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson in the following way:

"[He] is getting into years, but manifests to-day, as he did a half-century ago, the wizard power of a thought-leader."

In this early use of the term, Emerson is presented as a grey-haired Merlin who somehow conjures ideas that would be inconceivable to others. The work of the thought leader was almost magic.

In the latter part of the 20th century, a group of individuals emerged who built their careers based on creating and communicating business ideas.

These thought leaders served different roles - speakers, authors, consultants, and scholars - but they made money directly from their business ideas. We can make nods to Tom Peters and the McKinsey *7S Framework;* Steven Covey and his *7 Habits of Highly Effective People;* and Jim Collins' *Good to Great.*

In the pre-digital world, there was a limited way to get business ideas out into the world. The gatekeepers (traditional publishing and speaking bureaus) created a bottleneck. It meant that only a few people had access to the tools necessary to broadcast their business ideas. As a result, a limited few voices became amplified, while many others never had a chance to take the stage and be heard.

In the past fifteen years, there has been an explosion of individuals proclaiming their thought leadership expertise in both general business as well as highly specialized areas.

It has become much easier for individuals to produce content and get it out to the world. It's easy for almost anyone to post articles on LinkedIn and videos and YouTube. And many people have. Some people have excelled in this new world. And they have found niches for their thought leadership while others have been active without seeing results.

Perhaps even more significantly, we have recently seen organizations give increasing attention to the role of thought leadership within the corporate environment. Leaders have been asking how they—as an organization—create and deploy thought leadership to communicate value, attract customers, and create a competitive advantage. They have been increasingly assigning people to:

- Create thought leadership;
- Curate thought leadership; and
- Deploy thought leadership both internally and externally.

It is in this context that we raise a fundamental question:

"What is thought leadership?"

Most people shrug. The term "thought leadership" has been part of the business lexicon for years. But it has often been used imprecisely and sometimes flippantly. In fact, Forbes tagged the term as a 7-seed in its 2013 Jargon Madness competition (and it really out-played its seed, making it to the quarterfinals, only before losing to "Rock Star").

We have seen a variety of confusing definitions for "thought leadership." Here are two common ones that we have encountered:

Thought leadership is "what thought leaders do."

Thought leadership means "putting your smartest content out there for free."

These definitions are, at best, circular. Neither of these definitions provide much rigor. They are surface-level definitions suited for people who are consumers of thought leadership.

You can find thought leadership ideas in the business section of the airport bookstore. Or in free articles, whitepapers, and videos online.

These simplistic definitions still evoke hints of the mysterious "wizard power" ascribed to Ralph Waldo Emerson in the 19th century. Thought leadership may, indeed, be "what thought leaders do," but that's not very helpful if you're the person who needs to create or deploy thought leadership. Whether you're an individual with a solo thought leadership practice or a corporate employee tasked with thought leadership responsibilities, you need a deeper understanding:

What are the elements that make thought leadership work?

What makes a body of thought leadership strong?

Where is more effort needed?

What's needed is a practitioner's framework of thought leadership. It needs to be simple enough that it's memorable but also tested enough that it provides guidance for the creation and production of thought leadership. And that's what this white paper offers.

Thought Leadership Leverage (TLL) has built a definition and framework for what thought leadership is and how it is created.

Over the past two decades we have worked with some of the world's most influential business thought leaders as well as many emerging thought leaders.

In that time, we have systematically reviewed hundreds of thought leaders' work. And perhaps more importantly, we have had to help thought leaders turn raw ideas into well-developed thought leadership. This process allowed us to see the patterns within thought leadership that hold true regardless of the person's specific topic.

The result of this work is the identification of *four elements* that shape and define "thought leadership." This framework provides a clear definition and also proposes a way in which thought leadership is created, iterated, and innovated.

This framework can be used by any number of individuals or teams who will have to perform any or all of the following functions:

- Create thought leadership;
- Curate and evaluate the quality of thought leadership;
- Develop thought leadership capabilities within an organization; or
- Deploy thought leadership as marketers.

The good news about this framework —the elements of thought leadership —is that it applies for independent thought leaders as well as for directors of corporate thought leadership responsible for the enterprise function.

One note: This white paper does not explore the question of "what do we do with thought leadership once it has been created?" That question— about deployment—requires a separate discussion of leverage. We focus solely on the creation of thought leadership in this white paper.

The Four Elements

There's a formula to thought leadership. Much like there's a formula you can use to combine sodium and chlorine to make table salt. It's not wizard power or alchemy.

In our experience, all successful (and mature) thought leadership works contain four essential elements.

IDEAS	**PLATFORM**
CONTENT	**OFFERINGS**

Perhaps more tellingly, thought leadership missing any of these elements will struggle to catch fire. The outcomes vary by what has been neglected or underdeveloped. Thought leadership which lacks strong ideas will wither under scrutiny, but if it lacks well-documented content, then the thought leader will need to be present in the room to create impact.

In this white paper, the elements are presented in the order of Ideas, Platform, Content, and Offerings. Despite this order, there are several avenues in which a thought leader may connect with and work through the elements.

The elements are meant to be worked through as a system; although there may be a logical entry point—perhaps a strong platform name or ideas that are new to a particular market—one should consider and work through all of the elements to fully build their thought leadership.

Ideas

If someone were to ask, "What are your core insights?" They'd really be asking about ideas.

Ideas

Ideas are the raw material of thought leadership that:

- Draw upon experience and expertise.
- Produce "aha!" moments for others.
- Offer a way to significant positive change.

Ideas can be evaluated using several criteria: **Originality, Mastery, Quality,** and **Connection.** Additional details about these criteria are in the table below.

Criteria	Central Question	Descriptors
Originality	Has an audience heard these ideas before?	Inventive Innovative Creative
Mastery	Are they based on experience & expertise?	Real-life examples / application Derived from research
Quality	Do the ideas hold water?	Reactions Falsifiable Measurable
Connection	How do the ideas fit together?	Congruence Coherence Inter-relatedness Applicability

Ideas matter because they are the founding principles of thought leadership. Ideas themselves may solve business problems, and have the potential to change the world. Ideas can be brand new, inventive, or innovative—perhaps things that the market has never seen, or they might be existing concepts transported to a new audience or in a new setting.

Thought leadership is all about great ideas—having them, developing them, and applying them. When ideas are a strength:

- A thought leader's foundational "ahas" are innovative and clear.
- Simple concepts make the thought leader a game-changer with exceptional solutions.
- The thought leader's professional expertise shines through.

When thought leaders feel that they struggle with generating or building on ideas, they might feel stuck. Perhaps they feel that they aren't adding anything new to the conversation.

Or there's evidence after evaluating the thought leadership that their insights aren't functional or applicable. Maybe the thought leadership is fundamentally flawed.

It is a foundational part of the thought leader's role to generate, refine, and share ideas. Thought leaders need to effectively organize, analyze, and develop ideas, building strength or addressing opportunities in order to make sure their thought leadership has an advantage in the marketplace.

Platform

If someone were to ask, "How would someone summarize your ideas in a few words?" They'd really be asking about the platform.

A platform is a brand—a few words, phrase, statement, or name—that focuses on ideas (rather than the thought leader, as an individual). The platform:

- Speaks to a "need" rather than a "want" for potential buyers and users.
- Establishes credibility for the thought leader.
- Generates attention from buyers in the marketplace.

Platform can be evaluated with several criteria: **First Impression, Focus, Relevance,** and **Stickiness.**

Criteria	Central Question	Descriptors
First Impression	Does the platform attract attention?	Memorability Hooking
Focus	Does it address one theme or many?	Targeted Resonance
Relevance	Does it speak to a "need" or a "want"?	Tied to metrics Strategically aligned
Stickiness	Is the platform memorable and easy-to-understand?	Common and shared language Effective tag-line(s)

A platform matters because it is used to capture a buyer and/or audience's attention. It identifies or signals the specific problems a thought leader's insights might solve. A platform should be memorable so people will connect and recommend the associated solutions when someone has the perceived need of expert help. Platforms can be concepts summarized in a few words that commands someone's attention.

The platform is a declaration of a thought leader's specialization— distilled ideas and credible points that attract attention and are pointed to when there's an opportunity to apply them. When platform is a strength:

- People can find a thought leader's solutions based on their pain points; they see how it addresses their needs.
- Potential clients make accessing and applying the thought leadership content and offerings a priority.
- It is specific and tightly focused.

When thought leaders feel that they struggle with creating this focused platform, the thought leadership doesn't attract the attention of those who need the solutions. A thought leader may feel scattered or stuck— the thought leader is trying to be all things to all people or trying to solve every problem. Worse yet, it may be hard for the thought leader to turn their ideas into a reality. Content and offerings are hard to build and the motivations for thought leadership— growth, monetization, and evangelization—are hard to come by.

A great platform can propel a thought leader to greatness, and if not that, at least fulfilling their motivations. Those that create a unique platform tailored to insights and expertise, and that focus on their core insights, will get their thought leadership remembered and recognized for its value.
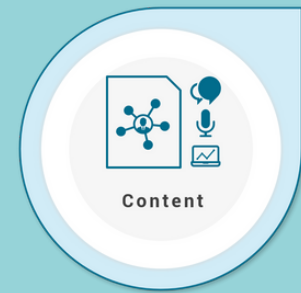
Examples of Platforms

The McKinsey 7-S Framework

Patrick Lencioni's "Five Dysfunctions of a Team"

Stephen R. Covey's "7 Habits of Highly Effective People"

Content

If someone were to ask, "Are your insights documented and organized?" They'd really be asking about content.

Content is the connective tissue that explains and illuminates insights; further, it:

- Presents a clear framework or point of view.
- Supports ideas with examples and data.
- Offers clear first steps for beginners or those new to the material.
- Can be tailored to specific audiences.

Content can be evaluated using several criteria: **Coherence, Framework, Significance, Consistency,** and **First Steps.** Additional details about these criteria are in the table below.

Criteria	Central Question	Descriptors
Coherence	Is all of your material linked to your platform?	Orthogonality Connections
Framework	Do you have a clear and teachable model?	Behavioral descriptors Learning objectives / outcomes
Significance	Is your content engaging and impactful?	Addresses a need Useful
Consistency	Is your material codified and stable?	Documented Completeness
First Steps	How do people get started?	Step-by-step approach

Well formed and organized content matters because it offers an in-depth explanation of ideas. Good content fulfills the promise of a thought leader's platform, and it ensures that people understand the insights of that thought leadership. It can be difficult to quantify exactly what content is; it may be a thought leader's relevant stories of experience and expertise, or something a bit more codified and documented. One such example of the latter is akin to a "show-runner's bible" or resource library—that is, a compendium of documented details of a thought leader's ideas and platform.

It is worth noting that the definition of content is separate from what one might traditionally think of as the outputs of thought leadership such as blogs, videos, articles, etc. Those, instead, are defined as offerings, which will be discussed in detail next. TLL's definition of content is more related to the internal work of fleshing-out one's thought leadership—building on and linking ideas to a platform and constructing messages in a way that can be translated to a variety of outputs (offerings).

As the connective tissue that explains and illuminates a thought leader's insights, content expands ideas and supports the platform. "Creating content," in this sense, is the development, research, and illustration of how thought leadership might solve problems.

When content is a strength:

- It lays out ideas in clear, digestible portions that are easy to remember.
- The material is engaging and relevant.
- It provides a thorough explanation of insights.

When thought leaders feel that they struggle with creating content, they may find that people react poorly—audiences feel that it is inauthentic, unnecessarily complex, difficult to understand, or full of jargon. The content and message may be unfocused and meander through many topics without clear insight. Or, worse yet, there may be significant logical gaps or fallacies.

Creating good content takes time, creativity, and logical energy. Thought leaders must not only create content, but then scour it, organize it, and verify that it doesn't have gaps in clarity or logic. Only then can thought leaders develop more and fill their vault with a variety of developed, cohesive material(s) that can be used to build a variety of offerings.

Offerings
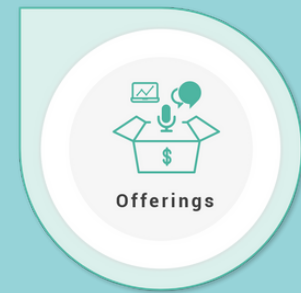
If someone were to ask, "How do you create impact through experience?" They'd really be asking about offerings.

Offerings are the many ways people experience your thought leadership. Offerings should:

- Spark both engagement and action.
- Create tangible and measurable results.
- Deliver value based on substance (not personality).

Offerings can be evaluated using several criteria: **Results, Turn-Key, Scalability, and Value.** Additional details about these criteria are in the table below.

Criteria	Central Question	Descriptors
Results	How will people and organizations benefit and what will change?	Data - quantitative and qualitative Link to metrics / priorities / objectives
Turn-Key	Do the offerings work when the thought leader isn't there?	Digital Off-the-shelf Semi-custom
Scalability	Can the ideas be delivered to thousands of people?	Ease-of-delivery Level of customization
Value	Is this worth the investment of resources (time/money)?	Price ROI Impact

A variety of solid offerings matter because they carry a thought leader's content to an audience, ensuring impact and giving ideas value. Without solid offerings, a thought leader's insights only work when he or she is in the room. Offerings can cost "buyers" anywhere from nothing (free!) to as high as a client-organization is willing to pay. "Free" offerings might be blog posts, popular press magazine articles, a recorded/distributed interview, a podcast, or a website. "Paid" offerings might be a thought leader's book, a traditional or digital workshop/webinar, consulting services, or an organizational assessment. Offerings might be one-off "items," or packages that are self-service or personally facilitated.

Offerings are so important because they are the way that people experience thought leadership.

Making impact relies on offerings which carry content to buyers and users. A single piece of content can spin off many offerings.

When offerings are a strength:

- They can be easily altered to reach many different audiences.
- The thought leader's investment in the creation of the offering is multiplied by its value.
- Impact is tangible and can be sustained.

When thought leaders feel that they struggle with building offerings they may find that they don't spark perceptible action or change. With weak offerings, content cannot be transferred to an audience without the thought leader's direct, hands-on assistance or presence. The cost-benefit may also be imprecisely calibrated for both the thought-leader and the client—the thought leader loses money in the creation of the offering and the client sees no return on their investment.

Building highly-effective offerings requires a solid strategy and roadmap as well as the resources to properly construct lasting, impactful products. Thought leaders must invest in creating and developing offerings to transform their content through multiple modalities, building both free and paid products that are impactful, self-sustaining, and have lasting value.

Common Thought Leadership Offerings

- **Books**
- **Blogs**
- **Podcasts**
- **Workshops**
- **Speeches (Keynotes)**
- **White Papers**
- **Consulting Services**

How the Four Elements Work Together

Truly effective, successful thought leadership requires these elements all be present and work together. There are several "traps" that both new and experienced thought leaders fall into that relate to each of these elements; these often occur because an element is missing or weak.

For example:

- When **ideas** aren't continuously generated and strengthened, the **platform** can become irrelevant, **content** and **offerings** go stale.
- When a **platform** isn't established, ideas have no filter, **content** is unfocused, and **offerings** are built on a whim.
- When **content** isn't created, the brilliant **ideas** and insights never fully support the **platform,** and **offerings** become difficult and resource-consuming to create.
- When **offerings** aren't thought through and planned, they become weak communicators of **ideas, platform,** and **content.**

We've sought to explain the interaction between the elements with two dimensions. One relates to the internal versus external nature of the elements. Both ideas and content are dependent on a thought leader's insightful, personal thinking, while platform and offerings are market facing (and need to be developed and designed as such). The other dimension is a scale of how simple or "expanded" the element is. Ideas and Platform are the basic elements. Content and Offerings expand on Ideas and Platform.
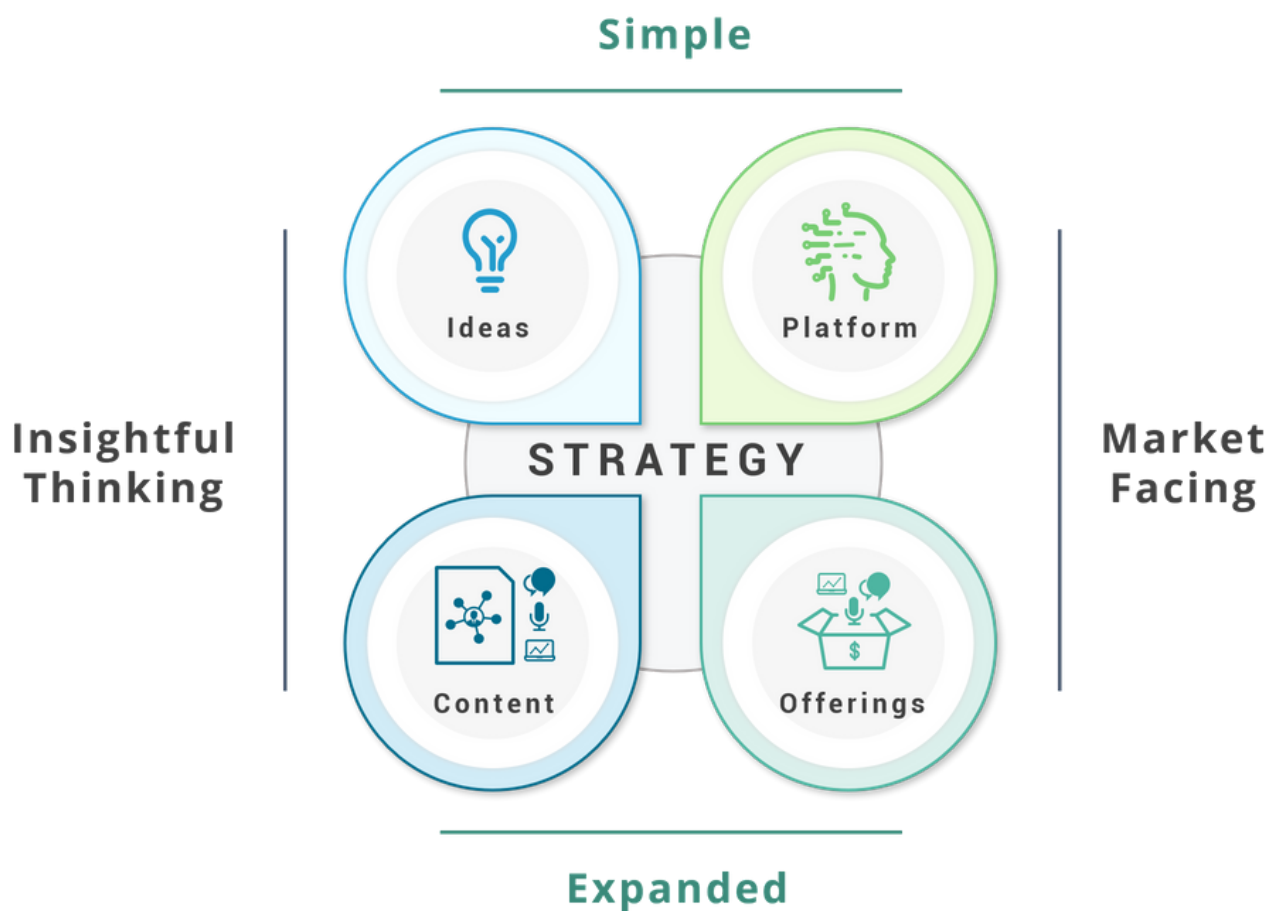
Good thought leadership is created when these elements are in balance and the thought leader has assessed each and has a plan to address weaknesses and opportunities.

Conclusion

Ideas, Platform, Content, and Offerings—simple elements that make up life-changing, business-transforming, paradigm-shifting thought leadership. A thought leader's challenge is to put the elements in balance, lean on strengths, and seek out opportunities to improve. For many, this is a heavy lift that requires a huge expenditure of resources; specifically, time, talent, and energy.

TLL recognizes this as a primary reason that thought leaders might not reach their full potential and reach their goals. TLL's thought leadership consulting practice is built around helping thought leaders assess, build, and enhance these elements—they've worked with independent and organizational thought leaders to:

- Generate and refine **ideas;**
- Build a credible, effective **platform;**
- Create and iterate **content;** and
- Design and develop **offerings** that resonate with buyers and users.

The Four Elements aren't just important to evolving a thought leader's business and achieving their goals, they are the foundation for being able to truly leverage one's thought leadership.

Through an introductory engagement, TLL is able to quickly assess the current state of a thought leader's elements, and recommend a professional-services journey that begins with addressing weaknesses and opportunities identified.

About Us

Thought Leadership Leverage is a specialist consultancy that focuses on thought leadership services.

For Organizations

- Co-create a thought leadership strategy
- Conduct an audit of activities
- Serve as an agency to design, develop and deploy campaigns
- Create metrics and dashboards
- Develop thought leadership skills in individuals or across an organization

Individuals involved in Thought Leadership

- Develop a strategy
- Codify content
- Create product to monetize ideas
- Conduct strategic account planning and outreach

Clients We've Worked With

- Procter and Gamble
- Astellas
- Bayer
- AB InBev
- Accenture

- Marshall Goldsmith
- Zoe Chance
- Juliet Funt
- Shannon Huffman Polson
- Stew Friedman

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