THE COMPLETE LEADER

COACHING GUIDE

CONCEPTUAL THINKING

The ability to think at an abstract level and apply assumptions to real life.



LEADERS ARE CLEAR THINKERS

One of the 25 leadership competencies

SECTION 01

WHY CONCEPTUAL THINKING MATTERS

Conceptual Thinking is one of the 25 core competencies that define a complete leader. As you grow this capability, you'll notice real shifts in how you lead yourself and influence others.

This guide is built for a 90-day journey. You'll explore the foundations, assess where you stand today, practice new behaviors, sidestep common traps, and track your progress, at your own pace or alongside a coach.

WHAT STRONG CONCEPTUAL THINKING LOOKS LIKE

- You see the big picture, and the interrelationships between individual, short-term, and long-term goals
- You can mentally role-play a long-range plan and predict outcomes accurately
- You get trusted with important projects and opportunities for advancement

> **REFLECT**
>
> *Why does Conceptual Thinking matter to you personally? How might developing it change your effectiveness as a leader?*

SECTION 02

FOUNDATIONS OF CONCEPTUAL THINKING

THE DEFINITION

The ability to think at an abstract level and apply assumptions to real life.

Like any skill worth mastering, Conceptual Thinking rests on a few core building blocks. Understanding them gives you a vocabulary for your own growth.

THE CORE ELEMENTS

1 **Seeing interrelationships**

Recognizing how individual goals, department goals, and the long-term corporate mission connect. Without this, you can't set priorities, direct people effectively, or apply the right resources.

2 **Challenging assumptions**

Questioning the beliefs built into your own thinking. Don't keep doing something because it has always been done that way. Ask what else is possible.

3 **Mental models**

Building a working library of frameworks: systems thinking, process mapping, continuous improvement, plus models drawn from economics, science, art, and philosophy.

REFLECT

Which element feels most familiar? Which one feels like a stretch right now?

SECTION 03

YOUR STARTING POINT

Before you move forward, take an honest look at where you are today. Read each statement and mark how often it's true of your leadership.

I enjoy discussing concepts, paradigms, and business philosophies with my associates and friends.

☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

I look for and identify the underlying assumptions behind organizational strategies.

☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

I have a list of conceptual models or organizing principles that I use regularly in my leadership and share with others.

☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

I think about the advantages and disadvantages of the structure and culture in an organization, and how I can influence it for better outcomes.

☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

I can explain how a decision in one part of the organization affects the others.

☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

I translate abstract concepts into terms my team can act on.

☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

REFLECT

Looking at your answers, where is your greatest opportunity for growth? What patterns do you notice?

SECTION 04

CONCEPTUAL THINKING IN PRACTICE

Competencies grow through deliberate practice. Work through the activities below in order, or choose the ones most relevant to your context.

ACTIVITY 01 45 min

Key Stakeholders

Take a futuristic concept currently under discussion at work and think it all the way through, with the stakeholders involved.

TRY IT

1. Name the issue, then list everyone who has a stake in it.
2. For each stakeholder, write their unique perspective and the issues sitting under the surface.
3. Draft three potential solutions, and note what resources the best one would need.

ACTIVITY 02 40 min

Organizational Priorities

Connect your own work to what the organization is actually trying to achieve.

TRY IT

1. Make an appointment to discuss organizational priorities with your supervisor or management team.
2. List each priority and determine what your role is in achieving it.
3. Note what your competition is doing, and who or what else contributes to its success.

ACTIVITY 03 60 min

Strategic Opportunities

Map the landscape around your organization to surface the opportunities worth pursuing.

TRY IT

1. List your internal and external customers, and what each needs from you.
2. Identify external trends that may shape those needs, and how you could learn more about them.
3. Decide what would make you stand out from competitors, then build action plans for stakeholders.

ACTIVITY 04 30 min

Run a Risk Analysis

Forecasting long-range outcomes means thinking through what could go wrong before it does.

TRY IT

1. Think about what could go wrong in your functional area.
2. Write a “what if” plan for each significant scenario.
3. Note which other functional groups would be affected, and share the plan with them.

ACTIVITY 05 30 min

Audit Your Own Function

Look at your own area the way a strategist would, from the outside in.

TRY IT

1. List your group's particular strengths and weaknesses.
2. Identify the external organizations or factors that affect activity in your area.
3. Choose one change that would strengthen your position, and start it.

ACTIVITY 06 45 min

Adopt a Mental Model

The best conceptual thinkers work from a studied set of models, not instinct alone.

TRY IT

1. Pick one model to learn: systems thinking, process mapping, constraint management, or one from another field.
2. Read enough to apply it, then use it on a current problem.
3. Add it to a written list of the organizing principles you use and share with others.

SECTION 05

COMMON CONCEPTUAL THINKING TRAPS

As you practice, watch for these common pitfalls. Naming them now makes them easier to catch in the moment.

01 **Abstraction without action**

Enjoying the concepts but never converting them into plans, priorities, or decisions. Conceptual thinking earns its keep when it changes what gets done.

02 **Spreading effort evenly**

The best conceptual thinkers put most of their effort into the most important 20 percent of initiatives. Treating everything as equally important wastes the skill.

03 **Thinking alone**

Concepts get sharper when tested. Seek out other futuristic thinkers to run your ideas past before you commit.

04 **Leaving your team out of the picture**

If your people don't understand how new priorities affect their jobs, your thinking stays in your head. Connect their performance goals to the larger goals.

REFLECT

Which trap feels most familiar? How will you stay aware of it as you practice?

SECTION 06

YOUR 90-DAY PRACTICE

Lasting change comes from a few focused habits, practiced consistently and tracked honestly. Build your plan below, on your own or with your coach.

CHOOSE YOUR THREE HABITS

Based on everything above, which three habits will make the biggest difference in growing your Conceptual Thinking over the next 90 days?

1

2

3

BUILD IN WEEKLY ACCOUNTABILITY

Write questions you can answer each week to measure progress and surface obstacles. The best ones are answered with “yes,” “no,” or a number.

Q1

Q2

Q3

Accountability partner: who will you share these with?

Completion date: when will you evaluate & celebrate?

Measurements of success

How will you celebrate?

SECTION 07

GO DEEPER

Keep building your Conceptual Thinking with these resources. Explore them, then capture what stands out to you.

BOOK	**The Complete Leader, Ch. 1.2: Conceptual Thinking**	The full framework and examples behind conceptual thinking.
PODCAST	**The Complete Leader Podcast**	Episodes 85, 86 & 138 explore conceptual thinking in practice.
ONLINE	**Conceptual Thinking competency library**	Videos, articles, and podcasts at TheCompleteLeader.org.

> **CAPTURE YOUR INSIGHTS**
>
> *As you work through these resources, which ideas most apply to your own growth in Conceptual Thinking?*

KEEP GOING

YOU'VE GOT THIS

Developing Conceptual Thinking is an investment in yourself and everyone you lead. Return to this guide often: revisit the activities, reread the traps, and celebrate small wins along the way.

Every complete leader started exactly where you are now.