

A Conversation with Denise Brosseau

How did you get interested in thought leadership?

While the term thought leader became popular only in the last few years, I have always been fascinated by people who are the key influencers and change makers in their community or industry – those with big ideas that can actually engage others to change the way things have always been done. Throughout my career, I have had the privilege of working with CEOs, executives, non-profit leaders and politicians whose ideas went far beyond how to make a good product or launch a new service to changing the world around them. Those individuals inspired me to believe that I could have a bigger impact on the world and help others to do the same.

How do you define the term “thought leader”? Does it mean something different in the context of, say, a software company versus a healthcare firm or a nonprofit?

Thought leaders are change makers who move and inspire others with their innovative ideas, turn those ideas into reality, and then create a dedicated group of friends, fans, and followers to help them replicate and scale those ideas into sustainable change. They spread their ideas, programs or initiatives far beyond one company, organization or community to make a broader impact in their industry or in the world.

The definition of thought leadership doesn't change based on which arena you are playing in. Thought leaders could be entrepreneurs or executives that aren't satisfied with an incremental improvement in how things have always been done; they push their industry by introducing something completely different – like cloud computing – that will revolutionize how people work every day. They are not all about selling their own products or services – they are interested in creating new ways of working or engaging people to think in new ways.

In a non-profit setting, this might mean creating a new program that is helping people locally but then looking for ways to scale those efforts by sharing best practices with others who can scale them nationally or internationally. It might mean instituting a new way of addressing a systemic problem that will have a far-reaching impact.

For me, thought leadership is not about being known, it is about being known for making a difference. To be a true thought leader, focus on adding real value to the world – it is not about building followers just for the ego value. It is about building visibility, credibility and a platform in order to have a meaningful impact in the world and leave a legacy that matters.

Could you share a few examples of thought leaders across multiple fields?

Thought leaders I admire include Robin Chase, founder of Zipcar and Chip Conley, founder of Joie de Vivre Hotels. Both of them built great companies but then they took their ideas to a broader platform and instituted more meaningful change far beyond their

own organizations.

Robin is a transportation innovator who has built upon her expertise in launching and leading one of the world's first and most successful car sharing companies to become a highly respected thought leader in three related arenas – transportation, entrepreneurship, and technology innovation. Today, she works with Fortune 500 companies and governments on transportation policy issues and she is perhaps best known for her on-going efforts to wake the world up about the dangers of global warming.

Chip Conley founded Joie de Vivre Hospitality when he was twenty-six years old and grew it from one hotel into the second largest boutique hotel company in America. He survived not one but two downturns between 2000 and 2010 (the dot-com crash and September 11, as well as the deep recession and fiscal crisis of 2008), yet he still won his industry's top award for customer satisfaction. Along the way, he developed groundbreaking ideas on how to build great companies that value employees, customers and investors equally, and he has spread these ideas far beyond the hotel industry as a speaker and author.

You write that thought leadership is the best career insurance policy. What do you mean by that?

It is no longer enough to just put your head down and do your job and hope you get noticed for the skills and expertise you bring to the table. You can't wait around and hope your good work is being noticed. Given all the economic downturns, mergers and corporate reorganizations, you can't even depend on having a job from year to year.

But if you are a well-known thought leader in your niche – someone who has a large network of followers, someone who is sought out for your ideas and known for adding significant value to any organization, then you no longer look for jobs (or clients or board seats), they look for you. People seek you out and you begin to gain a seat at the table where important decisions are being made rather than being left on the sidelines when change is underway. We'd all much prefer that, wouldn't we?

Could you describe your own career trajectory? What led you to make the moves you did—from manager at Motorola to founder of several non-profits and now to advising senior executives?

It is always a little confusing to explain my career trajectory as it is far from a straight line. At heart, I am an entrepreneur. I love the blank slate – where something has never been done before and I can figure out how to make it happen. I launched my first company at 26 – a Macintosh training business and early in my career I also joined several early stage technology companies and launched a lot of new products into the market.

But what I am committed to is bringing about a world with more women leaders at the top of every organization and this led me to co-found a women's leadership company,

Invent Your Future, as well as two non-profits, the Forum for Women Entrepreneurs and Springboard Enterprises. Over the last 14 years, Springboard has helped over 500 high-growth, women-led companies raise over \$6.5 billion in capital.

I also enjoy helping CEOs of start-ups, senior corporate executives and non-profit leaders see the strategic opportunities ahead and plan how they can have an even bigger impact in the world. I think of thought leadership as the ultimate blank slate – you are creating positive change in the world and there is no map for how that gets done.

How do you know if you are ready to be a thought leader?

The key to becoming a thought leader is to start by being a change agent. What change are you implementing in your own company, organization or community? Is it a change that has broader applicability? Do you have a point of view on what needs to change on a far bigger scale – what I call a “*What If?* future?” Do you want to see your ideas, programs or initiatives adopted far more widely in order to bring about that better future?

If you answered these questions with a resounding “yes,” then it’s time to build a following. You can’t change the world all on your own! Reach out to others to test your ideas, gain buy-in and get them on board to help you scale the efforts you have underway. That is the first step to becoming a thought leader.

How did you develop the 7-step process to becoming a thought leader that you discuss in the book?

I first began to think about the actual steps to becoming a thought leader when I was invited to teach a workshop about the subject at an “Invent Your Future” conference a few years ago. I was working with clients very organically, helping them scale their influence and impact in the world but I had never tried to teach these ideas to a group of people before. That experience forced me to sit down and think carefully about what it is I actually do and what steps are needed to make the leap from leader to thought leader.

I then invited a friend of mine who is a graphic facilitator to come over and we put up a large piece of white paper on the wall. As she interviewed me about what I do, we started adding large yellow post-it notes all over the paper and then arranging and re-arranging them until they were in some semblance of a path that made sense to both of us. She then created a beautiful map that was the basis of the 7-step journey that I outlined in the book. I took that map with me to my first meeting with the woman who became the editor of my book. It helped her to see my vision and convinced her to give me a contract with Wiley to publish this book.

Have you felt the need to refine the 7-step process over time?

The initial map I create had only five steps but as I began to write the book, I added two more. The first is Chapter 4: “Put Your ‘I’ On the Line.” because I realized that I had a lot of conversations with my clients and others I interviewed for the book about what

held them back from stepping into the spotlight and I realized that everyone faced some challenge in that regard. It doesn't always happen at the beginning, but somewhere along their thought leadership journey many people have a crisis of confidence and I found I needed to address that.

Secondly, I discovered that there was a codify step that was required if you really want to scale your ideas. As Dan & Chip Heath talk about in their book, *Switch: How to Make Change When Change is Hard*, you can't just expect others to follow in your footsteps if you don't show them the path. You have to develop a framework or your own 7-step process – show others the way forward to the “*What If? Future*” you envision. This became step five, Codify Your Lessons Learned.

What surprised you the most in the process of writing this book?

It's surprising how many leaders don't realize how important it is to “Put Yourself on SHOUT,” as I call it in the book. In other words, tell your story to a broader audience in order to gain followers for your ideas. That is what will allow you to scale your visibility, credibility and impact.

When I first interviewed Miki Agrawal, CEO of the healthy pizza chain, WILD, she was relatively unknown outside New York City and the young entrepreneurial community to which she belonged. Since then she has begun speaking widely, created a Kickstarter campaign and published a book that outlines her entrepreneurial journey and lessons learned. All of these have brought her widespread visibility for her ideas as well as funding for her newest venture, THINX. While not every thought leader needs to write a book, you are not going to spread your ideas if you keep quiet about them. You must be discoverable and find a way to SHOUT!

What are some common roadblocks that prevent successful leaders from making the leap to become thought leaders?

Leaders face a variety of different roadblocks – both internal and external – on their path to becoming thought leaders. Sometimes it's the internal voices – what one of my clients calls the ‘itty bitty shitty committee’ that take us out of the game. Other times it's a lack of knowledge of what to do next or no support for our ideas within our organization.

When President Obama signed the bill that repealed the “Don't Ask Don't Tell” Policy in the US Military, there were only a few people standing on the stage with him that day – one of them was Zoe Dunning, a U.S. Naval Academy graduate and retired Commander from the US Navy Reserves. Because of a unique legal ruling, Dunning was the first and only openly gay person who was allowed to remain on active duty in the US Military. For 17 years, she worked tirelessly as a vocal and visible advocate for other gay service members – speaking at rallies, talking to the press, lobbying members of Congress and co-founding the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a non-profit that helped support and defend gay service members.

Dunning faced a lot of backlash from members of the military and from others for her work. Many thought she was bringing shame on the Navy, since she was still on active duty. She kept going because, as she said, she wanted to be “part of the solution.”

Thought leaders do not always face such headwinds, but they often do need courage to go forward with their ideas – pushing for important change in their community or industry. No matter what roadblocks you do face, it is critical to find your own inner strength, build outside supporters and be ‘part of the solution’ in your own industry or community.

Are there any special roadblocks that successful women face on the path to becoming a thought leader?

I do not believe that women, as a whole, yet understand the power of their own voices – the power that they can have when they take a stand and showcase their ideas and their expertise. Low representation of women on boards, in the C-Suite and in the halls of Congress means our future is being shaped for us by those who may have different values and priorities. We need to claim our voice – to understand that, like my friend Katie Orenstein, the CEO of the OpEd Project says, “thought leadership is like citizenship, that having a voice is like having a vote—having a say in what goes on in the world.”

I believe it is time for more women’s voices to be heard at the top of every organization. As more women seek to put their ideas out there and gain recognition for them, we will have a society in which women have strong representation among the ranks of prominent thought leaders in our society.

What are the first steps readers can take today if they have decided they would like to become thought leaders?

That depends on where they are in their career. If they are fairly senior and have already implemented significant changes in their company or their industry, it might be time to codify their expertise into a framework or roadmap for others to follow. Or they can follow in the footsteps of Chip Conley or Sheryl Sandberg - write a book or start speaking about what they know so that they can share their best practices with the world.

If readers are just getting started, I recommend that they think about the “*What If? Future*” that they’d like to bring about. Think about: What change would you like to see in your field, company or community? And what role will you play in bringing it about? Then begin to share your ideas with a few people around you and find your ‘peeps’ – those who share your conviction that the world can be a better place. Don’t try to go it alone – find those friends, fans and followers who can help you test and spread your ideas.