

Prof. Dr. Ulrich Erhardt

Bridging Knowledge and Power
- Strengthening Think Tanks through Capacity Building -

It is not a surprise that Barack Obama is in contact with a variety of powerful think tanks. The world idea factories are working on solutions for everything from global warming to Afghanistan, from the Wall Street's implosion to the future of Africa. Leaders around the world, managers from state, private and civil society organisations need think tanks providing them with independent analysis, helping to set policy agendas, and bridging the gap between knowledge and action.

However, not all of the 5500 think tanks worldwide, in nearly 170 countries are successful. Many policy advising organization fail, especially in developing countries, not only because of a lack of funds, yet rather due to the fact that they underestimate the decisive role of capacity building as the key to become and remain a successful 'bridging organization'. In this article we will first elaborate on what is called the need for "bridging competencies" and second we will specify what are the individual and organizational competencies required to perform as a successful think tank.

1. Think Tanks without 'Bridging Competencies'?

Historically the word think tank stems from the RAND Corporation, which operated as a closed and secure environment for US strategic thinking after World War II. The term entered popular usage in 1960s to describe a group of specialist's undertaking intensive studies on important policy issues. According the current international literature (see Stone 2005) think tanks are often viewed as critical link between knowledge and power, in other words think tanks are "bridging institutions". In line with the definition of UNDP we define think as "organisations engaged, on a regular basis, in research and advocacy on any matter related to public policy. They are the bridge between knowledge and power in modern democracies". Whatever the different categories of think tanks are - political party affiliated, government affiliated, autonomous and independent, university affiliated (see Thunert) – they all act as a bridge between the academic and policymaking communities, translating research into a language and form that is understandable, reliable, and accessible for policymakers and the public. (Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the US: Academics, Advisors and Advocates, Rutledge 2007).The image of a bridge refers to the key function of a think tank and is the most often used illustration of think tanks worldwide.

Many policy advice organizations fail, however, because they are missing the required capacities in order "to successfully bridge" knowledge and

power. In many countries we observe similar problems: think tanks recruit either the “wrong people” or people with insufficient competencies. Generally think tanks underestimate the decisive role of capacity building as the core competence enabling an outstanding role within the field of successfully implemented “bridging organizations”.

Even worse, the management of think tanks often is neglecting or rather underestimating the impact of individual, organizational and system learning in order to achieve impacts in a society. As Magued Osman, chairman of the Egyptian Information and Decision Support Center IDSC pointed out: “The insufficiency of human resources qualified to work in think tanks is an important challenge that cannot be underestimated. Capacity building requires scientific accumulation as well as an environment enabling high levels of scientific production”.

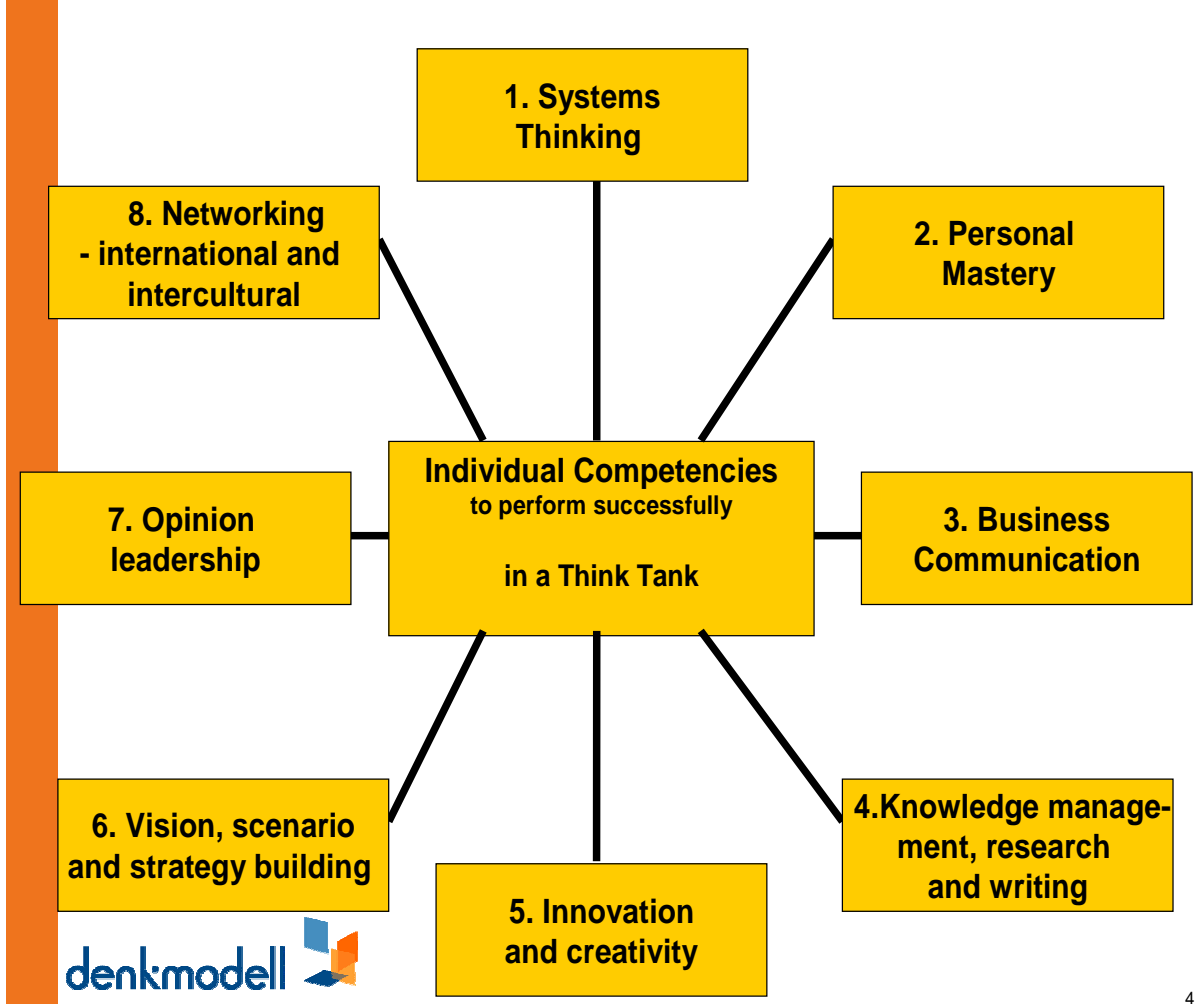
2. Towards a Concept of Capacity Building for Think Tanks

If think tanks are bridges between knowledge and power, they require professionals able to perform as “bridger” between knowledge and power, respectively. A university degree is not the mere assuring factor per se. Institutions are required to establish an integrated concept enhancing to develop competencies of individuals, organisations and the society as a whole. In line with the approach of the German Capacity Building Provider InWent we here define Capacity Building as a concept fostering systematically competencies on the individual, the organisational as well as on the societal level. .

Individual competencies required in a think tank

No doubt about it: General technical knowledge (“hard skills”) as well as certain general methodological competences (e.g.: project management) and personal competences, (e.g. ability to work under pressure, intercultural sensitivity) are required.

However, according our experience working with think tanks in many countries (see:www.denkmodell.de) we regard the following individual competencies as essential for working in a “bridging institution”:



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Organisational competencies required in think tanks

Good management and good governance (at the organisational level) is crucial for the effectiveness of policy institutes. In other words think tanks have to convert from the traditional to modern paradigm of organisations. To be more explicit they have to learn to overcome the structures of “management by stick “and to replace it by “management by carrot and communication“. The following chart compares the traditional with the modern patterns, which should serve as a guidance for think tank institutions.

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|---------------------|-----|--|
| Command and control | vs. | management by objectives |
| Hierarchy | vs. | team orientation and self-responsibility |
| Age | vs. | competence |
| Isolated experts | vs. | networking experts |
| One-dimensional | vs. | interdisciplinary expertise |
| Copy right | vs. | share ware |
| Quantity-oriented | vs. | quality-oriented output |

Inspiring and helpful source for think tanks in this respect is Peter Singe's vision of a learning organisation. According to Peter Singe (1990: 3) *learning organisations* are: "...organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together." The basic rationale for such organisations is that in situations of rapid change only those that are flexible, adaptive and productive will excel. For this to happen, it is argued, organisations need to 'discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at *all* levels'. While all people have the capacity to learn, the structures in which they have to function are often not conducive to reflection and engagement. The dimension that distinguishes learning from more traditional organisations is the mastery of certain basic disciplines or 'component technologies'. According to Peter Singe there are 5 core disciplines enabling organisation to convert into a 'learning organisation'. These are: 1. Systemic thinking; 2. Personal mastery; 3. Mental models; 4. Building shared vision and 5. Team learning.

In our presentation we were only able to briefly describe elements of a holistic Capacity Building Programme for think tanks. However, we are convinced that without such a system no think tank will survive in the long run.

In a globalised world think tanks are needed more than ever before, because "research cannot be used unless it is available to those who might best use it, at the time they need it, in a format they can use and with the findings that are comprehensible and adaptable to local circumstances" (Saywell and Cotton, in: Struyk, 2006 p. 63).

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