Thinking About Thought Leadership

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While thinking about this short article on thought leadership I came across a story about an executive who received a last-minute invitation to present a keynote address at an important conference. He assigned an employee to write a punchy, 20-minute speech. After returning from the conference, the executive summoned the employee to his office and slapped the speech angrily on his desk. “Why did you give me an hour-long speech?” the executive complained. “Most of the audience walked out before I finished.” “But I gave you a 20-minute speech,” the employee replied, “along with the two extra copies you asked for.”

The story appears in Simon Ramo’s recent booklet To Wit, which makes a case for the importance of humor in leadership. I like Ramo’s definition of leadership as “setting people’s directions.” It’s both succinct and spatial. Given that definition, it follows that thought leadership is getting people to think in certain ways.

Which thought leaders have influenced you most? What does that list say about you? Some who come quickly to my mind include:

**Lawrence Lessig**, the Creative Commons founder who is changing how many people think about restrictions on non-commercial “remixes” of copyrighted intellectual property (like movie excerpts, for instance).

**David Wiley**, the educator who inspired me to think about how open educational resources can be part of a viable business model for higher education.

**Michael Goodchild**, who convinced many of us to think of “geographic information science” as a distinctive and integrative field of study.

Esri expects its Education Team members to be thought leaders. The company expects us to have ideas about how GIS can enrich teaching and learning. It expects that our ideas will be heard, and that they’ll make a difference. My team mates and I get ideas by listening to educators and students, and to Esri colleagues who develop ArcGIS software, as well as by reading the literature. Throughout the year we share ideas via countless presentations, publications, social media posts, and conversations with the education community. It’s not easy to measure the impact of all this output, but the Education Team’s productivity has surely impressed me since I arrived in Redlands last summer.

Even in the five short months I’ve been part of the Team, several opportunities to assert thought leadership have come my way. For instance, just six weeks into the job I was asked to present Esri’s position on “free and open source software” to a skeptical audience at the 2011 FOSS4G conference. More recently, the United Nations invited me to address its Commission on Science and Technology for
Development about the role of GIS and spatial thinking in national secondary school curricula. And throughout the fall 2011, I worked with Education Team members to craft a 2012 Marketing Plan that identifies strategic priorities for the coming year, including key messages to current and prospective education users.

Additionally, planning has begun in earnest for the 2012 Education GIS Conference (formerly the Education User Conference). We consider the “EdUC” to be our most important thought leadership opportunity of the year. This year’s conference will be a milestone for us. 2012 marks 20 years since Jack Dangermond founded the Education Team when he hired Mike Phoenix and Charlie Fitzpatrick on the same day. More important, we believe that the next generation of Esri technology—in particular, our cloud-based platform called “ArcGIS Online”—heralds a new generation of teaching with GIS. Consequently, the theme of the 2012 Education GIS Conference will be “approaching education community 20.0.” I hope you’ll plan to join us in San Diego for what promises to be a pivotal event.

Meanwhile, I’ll close this piece with a list of qualities this aspiring thought leader strives for:

**Be informed.** Read the literature (not just the online chatter) and seek out news and opinions from trusted contacts. Be engaged with professional associations at which noteworthy colleagues congregate.

**Have an idea.** Speak up only when you have something important to say. Don’t waste people’s time with trivia.

**Be clear.** How well one expresses an idea is inseparable from the quality of the idea itself.

**Be persistent.** If an idea is really important, it’s worth reiterating. And if it’s unimportant, no one will bother disagreeing.

**Have a sense of humor.** As Ramos observes, “if leadership is about setting people’s directions, then wit and humor are powerful tools to get them moving, turning work into play and chores into delights.”