Abstract
When properly structured and facilitated, groups can provide an effective forum that stimulates both group and individual thinking. This paper is based on the author’s extensive experience in facilitating peer support groups and, in particular, his involvement in facilitating a group of 16 business executives, who met monthly for nearly 10 years to discuss the challenges of running their companies. The paper will relate the author’s experiences facilitating that group, and will discuss his findings about effective group thinking.

Key Words: CEO peer groups; group facilitation; thinking in groups; entrepreneurship; leadership; business

1. Introduction
The world of business today is a dynamic and energizing environment, just as it was when entrepreneur Louis De Geer, considered by many to be the father of Swedish industry, started his business career just about 400 years ago. When De Geer came to Sweden seeking new business opportunities in the 1620s, he no doubt embodied the same courage and intensity that characterizes today’s generation of business leaders and entrepreneurs, who passionately and fearlessly follow their dreams and their instincts, turning new business ideas into reality.

However, for most entrepreneurs (perhaps even De Geer), running a business is a lonely pursuit. Because entrepreneurs most often follow “the road less traveled,” they more often than not find themselves traveling that road alone. Sometimes, employees may share the goals of the business entrepreneur. In most cases, spouses and other family members offer unconditional support. Yet, even with such support, successful business entrepreneurs are driven to succeed by a vision that few others can understand, let alone appreciate.

Unfortunately, that “aloneness” also means that most business entrepreneurs tend to internalize their thinking when it comes to addressing issues in their business. Even though they may interact with hundreds of different people throughout their working day, the thinking involved in processing the information and ideas that come from those interactions almost always takes place in isolation from others, most often at the end of a long work day when everyone else has gone home and the business entrepreneur is left alone.

In truth, no entrepreneur, no matter how smart or insightful or visionary, can know all of the answers when it comes to charting a path for business success. So, business entrepreneurs must find ways to break out of their solitary “thinking bubble,” and engage in dialogue with others who can actively challenges their assumptions and ideas. That’s because such “thinking conversations” have the power to transform individual thinking by uncovering nuances, revealing complexities, and bringing new perspectives, activities that are essential in successfully addressing business challenges.

During the past ten years, this author has worked with a group of talented entrepreneurs in what has turned out to be an interesting experiment in thinking in groups. That experience has shown that, when properly structured and facilitated, such learning cohorts not only provide business entrepreneurs with a supportive environment that regularly stimulates those thinking conversations, but which stimulates individual thinking as well. This paper provides background about that work with business entrepreneurs, and offers some insights into how working in groups affects thinking.
2. Peer Group Program Background
As noted above, entrepreneurs are driven to follow their own instincts when it comes to running their own business. They are often suspicious of advice, whether it comes from employees or outside professional advisors. Equally important, in small companies, the management team that supports the business entrepreneur (if one even exists at all) is often comprised of less seasoned business managers, whose knowledge and experience does not match that of the entrepreneur. As such, business entrepreneurs are limited in the extent to which they can engage in interactive dialogue and debate, which is an essential part of the management process, and which can be an important factor in the success of the business.

These realities of the business entrepreneur’s experience are in sharp contrast to that of business leaders of large enterprises, where the skills of the business leader are usually supported by a team of talented managers who are capable of engaging the business leader on his or her own level.

In addition, business leaders in large companies often have the support of a formal board of directors, consisting of professional advisors and experienced business leaders who can provide objectivity and guidance. However, the small companies run by business entrepreneurs typically do not have the benefit of a formal board of directors.

For business entrepreneurs, an established alternative to a formal board of directors is participation in a peer group program specifically designed for business owners, partners or principals. In the United States, there are a number of organizations that organize and sponsor such peer groups, including The Executive Committee (better known as TEC) and the Young Presidents Organization (also known as YPO). Such forums provide participants with many of the benefits of having a formal board of directors, and can offer business entrepreneurs an escape from the sense of isolation that often characterizes the entrepreneurial experience.

The Entrepreneurs’ Executive Forum (EEF) program was one such CEO peer group program, which was conducted by this author from March 1997 through December 2006 under the auspices of the Management Center at Boston College (Chestnut Hill, MA, USA).

2.1 Program Structure
The EEF program followed a model similar to that of other business entrepreneur peer group programs, and was designed to provide participants with an experience similar to that of a dedicated company board of directors. The main component of the program consisted of monthly, half-day meetings of small cohorts of business entrepreneurs. Many participants also elected to receive individual coaching and counseling between monthly cohort meetings.

At any given time, the EEF program consisted of as many as five separate cohort groups, with the participation of business entrepreneurs from 40 different companies located in the greater Boston, MA (USA) area. However, the core of the program consisted of 16 executives who participated in two separate cohort groups for most of its ten year duration.

2.2 Profile of Program Participants
Participants in the EEF Program were business entrepreneurs, partners or principals in privately-held companies. Individual program participants were highly experienced business entrepreneurs, typically having anywhere from ten to 30 years of business experience each. The majority of participants had several years of work experience prior to starting their own companies, but a few participants led multi-generational family businesses and had no experience apart from running those companies.

Several program participants were equal partners with another business entrepreneur who did not participate in the EEF program. Notably, two business partners from the same company were concurrent participants in the program, although they were assigned to separate cohort groups.
Program participants headed companies with annual sales (turnover) of between $3 million and $50 million (U.S.), and with as few as five and as many as 100 employees. The types of companies represented a wide range of industries, including manufacturing, wholesaling and distribution, technology, biological sciences and professional service firms.

2.3 Format of Cohort Meetings
The core element of the EEF program was a monthly, half-day long meeting of each cohort group, with meeting time allotted equally among the participating business entrepreneurs. During their allotted time, each participant presented a brief summary of a specific issue or challenge encountered in running their business, which was then followed by a discussion by the whole cohort intended to identify various perspectives, suggestions and ideas on how best to address the issue.

Over time, participants in one cohort group decided to modify the meeting format to allot extended blocks of time to individual participants with more complex issues. On occasion, the cohort groups would also use a portion of the available meeting time to discuss an article on a business topic of interest.

As the working relationships strengthened between the individual members of cohort groups, the focus of the cohort’s work moved beyond offering advice and counsel to individual participants. For example, individual participants frequently shared with the cohort specific goals and objectives for their businesses, thereby allowing cohort members to hold them accountable for their progress in achieving them.

2.4 The Role of the Facilitator
It is challenging, if not impossible, for a single individual to both lead and participate in the same meeting. For that reason, the facilitation of cohort meetings by a non-participant was a key element of the EEF peer group program. The author personally facilitated all cohort meetings—more than 300 meetings over a 10 year period!

Third-party facilitation was vitally important during those periods in which individual participants were formed into effective working cohorts, and when new participants were introduced into existing cohorts. The facilitator was able to provide individual participants with information on the purpose and structure of the EEF program, to prepare them to participate fully in cohort meetings, and to offer counsel on how best to contribute to meeting discussions while supporting the views and opinions of others.

During cohort meetings, the facilitator worked to ensure that meetings followed the basic agenda, that the dialogue among participants remained focused on the specific issue being discussed, that all participants were fully engaged in the discussion, and that at least some resolution was achieved within the time allotted. The facilitator also handled meeting administration issues, such as record keeping and scheduling.

Most importantly, the facilitator’s active presence at cohort meetings freed individual participants from the need to attend to meeting organization issues, and allowed them to fully engage in the presentation and discussion of issues with other participating business entrepreneurs.

3. Program/Cohort Dynamics
There were several key dynamics of the EEF program and the cohort groups that directly contributed to the depth and quality of the discussions that took place during the monthly cohort meetings, as follows:

*Extensive Knowledge Base:* First, taken as a whole, the business entrepreneurs who participated in the EEF program offered an extensive knowledge base of business practices.
Individual participants typically had at least 15 years of relevant business experience, with several individuals having 25 or more years of business experience. Therefore, a cohort of six to eight business entrepreneurs often represented a combined total of between 100-200 years of business experience that could be drawn upon in discussions of individual issues.

**Diversity of Experience:** Second, business entrepreneurs who participated in the EEF program came from a wide range of industries, from manufacturing to technology to service businesses. This diversity of experience helped to ensure that “best practices” from a number of different industry perspectives could be shared in cohort discussions, and applied as appropriate to address seemingly intractable issues, thereby expanding the expertise of individual participants.

**Pledge of Confidentiality:** Third, participants in each cohort group pledged to hold in confidence all matters that were brought before the cohort for discussion. This commitment to protect the confidentiality of information helped participating business entrepreneurs develop a high degree of comfort with other participants, and willingness to openly discuss difficult and sometimes personal challenges without fear of harm or ridicule.

**Strong Network of Support:** Fourth, over time, the growing strength and depth of the relationships between cohort participants enabled individual participants to build effective professional and personal relationships with each other, which served as an important source of support for many individual participants during particularly difficult times in their businesses or their personal lives.

4. Some Lessons About Thinking in Groups
By design, CEO peer group programs are not specifically intended to promote thinking. Indeed, business entrepreneurs who participated in the EEF program were initially urged to avoid speculation and theorizing about possible solutions to business issues that were presented for discussion. Instead, participants were asked to offer only those insights and ideas that were drawn directly from their own personal business experience, or to share only those “best practices” that they had successfully applied in dealing with similar issues in their own companies.

However, business entrepreneurs who participated in the EEF program quickly moved beyond simply sharing their personal experiences with others. This shift occurred in part because the issues initially presented by participants for discussion with their cohort were issues common to all business entrepreneurs, and issues that other cohort participants were likely to have personally experienced. Because cohort groups met every month, participants soon exhausted these more obvious topics, and were forced to more deeply examine their business challenges in order to present new issues for discussion.

The shift away from sharing direct experiences also took place as participants developed respectful and trusting relationships with other cohort participants. As relationships evolved within the cohort, participating business entrepreneurs began to feel more comfortable in sharing their underlying beliefs and attitudes with other participants, and became more open to the views and perspectives of others.

Finally, the personal agendas of individual participants gradually gave way to the larger agenda of the cohort, and participants recognized the unique opportunity to discuss and explore more general business issues with a group of experienced executives.

Therefore, over time, thinking as a group about business issues eventually replaced the simple sharing of specific experience as the normative activity within cohort meetings. In
some cases, this approach led to a more complete understanding of complex issues, or in the
development of additional questions requiring exploration. But in all cases, thinking as a
group led to a more thorough understanding of issues, and the development of more
disciplined thinking among individual participants.

Here then are several lessons that have emerged from this decade-long experience in peer
group thinking:

**Thinking in groups is a dynamic experience for participants:** Effective group thinking
depends on the social and interpersonal characteristics of the individual group members, as
well as on individual members’ preferred methods of thinking. For example, groups
comprised of individuals with highly developed interpersonal skills tend to coalesce quickly
into effective cohorts, while groups comprised of individuals with less developed social skills
spend more time attempting to understand individual perspectives within the group dynamic,
and in securing their position in that environment.

Preferred individual thinking styles can also impact the effectiveness of group thinking. By
its nature, group thinking tends to be more dynamic and less predictable. Those who
prefer to process information more deliberately or in a linear fashion may find themselves
frustrated with the apparent random nature of group thinking.

The pace of group thinking places greater emphasis on verbal communication; therefore,
group members with strong communication skills will achieve greater success in ensuring
that their ideas are understood, while participants with less effective communication skills are
more likely to have difficulty in expressing their ideas and viewpoints, and are more
frequently misunderstood.

**Thinking in groups promotes more rigorous thinking discipline in individual participants:**
Effective group thinking depends on the commitment of each individual group member to the
success of the group’s work. Since no group member wishes to be responsible for the group’s
failure, participants tend to place a greater priority on being prepared for each meeting, and
for completing whatever advanced work is required. This advanced work can include
reviewing the meeting agenda and notes of past meetings, reading and analyzing reports and
articles that will be discussed at the meeting, and formulating appropriate topics for
discussion.

An important component of this advanced preparation is that individual group members often
evaluate their planned contributions from the perspective of how other group members will
react and respond. This “pre-testing” of ideas against the perceived views and philosophies of
other group members (“what would the group say?”) imposes a more rigorous thinking
discipline on individual participants, usually resulting in the presentation of ideas and issues
that have been more thoroughly formulated and vetted in advance.

Finally, within the context of the group meetings, individual views and ideas are routinely
scrutinized and challenged by other participants. Rather than remaining isolated, individual
participants are forced to respond to the perspectives of other group members, to assess the
validity of their views and ideas in a broader context and, when appropriate, to reformulate
those views in light of new information.

**Thinking in groups allows for a more thorough evaluation of individual issues and ideas:**
The adage “two brains are better than one” accurately characterizes the dynamics of effective
group thinking. By harnessing the experience and insight of multiple participants, group
thinking typically leads to the rapid generation of numerous ideas, and the identification of
alternative solutions to problems and challenges. With a larger pool of ideas from which to choose, effective group thinking typically leads to better ideas and better solutions.

In addition, idea generation activities within a group often produce unusual or unique ideas or suggestions that would have gone unidentified otherwise. These “outside the box” ideas can frequently result in significant shifts in thinking, producing new insights into issues and promoting new solutions to problems and challenges.

Group thinking is also particularly well-suited for analyzing and addressing complex issues. The sharing of multiple perspectives inherent in most group work tends to better illuminate issues along multiple dimensions, and reveal previously hidden or underappreciated perspectives.

Thinking in groups can help to reveal important complexities in apparently simple issues: Issues and challenges facing business executives are often much more complex than they originally appear. Group discussions will often reveal previously unappreciated complexities behind what may appear at first glance to be a relatively simple issue. Because individual group members view each issue from a unique perspective, group discussions can bring into focus aspects of an issue that may have been previously unseen by others. In this context, group thinking can provide a fuller, more complete understanding of an issue and its complexities, prior to efforts to formulate possible solutions.

Individual thinking “breakthroughs” frequently occur as a result of listening to issues presented by others: One of the most significant findings of this work over the past decade is that individual and group thinking breakthroughs frequently occur as a result of simply listening to issues and ideas presented by others. Individual participants will often discuss an issue that suddenly resonates with another group member, either because that group member has a similar issue that has been previously unidentified or unresolved, or because the solutions proposed in one context can be successfully applied to addressing other issues.

In a group context, discussions on a particular issue tend to build, point-by-point, on the foundations provided by the comments and ideas of others, until the group members achieve a shared, collaborative understanding of the issue that could not have been achieved individually.

Over time, the continuous sharing of ideas within a group builds a reservoir of knowledge that informs the group as it addresses new issues and challenges. That knowledge base continues to grow and evolve with each group meeting and every group discussion, further informing the actions of individual group members as well as the group.

Thinking in groups often reaffirms individual thinking: Finally, group thinking often reaffirms the viewpoint of an individual group member, even when that viewpoint diverges from the consensus of the group. The simple act of placing an issue in front of a group for rigorous examination forces the individual group member to critically reexamine his/her views and assumptions. When those views and assumptions stand up to such scrutiny, the individual group member can be confident that the issue has been properly and thoroughly vetted by the group, and that the potential consequences for taking a different approach have been fully detailed and understood.

5. Implications/Summary
An important caveat regarding the lessons in thinking derived from the EEF peer group program was the absence of any hierarchical or dependency relationship between the participating business entrepreneurs.
For example, each participant was the owner of their own respective company, and therefore had no formal organizational or reporting relationship with any of the other participants. Further, none of the participants had a pre-existing business relationship with any of the other participants when they began their participation in the program (although business relationships between some of the participants did develop as a result of the program).

The absence of any such relationships was an essential element of the EEF peer group program, and helped to ensure an open and candid exchange of information and ideas among participating business entrepreneurs. Unfortunately, hierarchical relationships between participants are common in most group settings and, predictably, such relationships among group members pose numerous challenges to the development of effective thinking conversations.

Also, as noted above, ongoing facilitation by a neutral third-party was a critical force that helped to ensure that thinking conversations within cohort groups in the EEF program continued to develop and evolve over time. Through their continued participation in the program, participating business entrepreneurs effectively gave the facilitator permission to hold them accountable for their ongoing commitment to the quality of the cohort experience, and for their own continuing professional development.

The camaraderie and fellowship with other business entrepreneurs was certainly a motivating factor in the decision of participants to continue their participation in the EEF program. However, it is doubtful that that camaraderie alone would have been sufficient to sustain the interest of participants over time, or that it would have provided sufficient value to justify the commitment of time required of those business entrepreneurs who participated.

Nonetheless, as the EEF program experience clearly demonstrates, thinking in groups can be a vital and rewarding activity, even for those individuals for whom thinking alone is a preferred mode of inquiry. It can help to bring clarity to complex issues, as well as greater insight and understanding to seemingly simple questions. Finally, thinking in groups is an effectively enhances and sharpens individual thinking skills.

About the Author
William von Achen is a management consultant and executive coach to business executives. Since 1995, he has facilitated monthly peer group meetings of business executives through the Management Center at the Carroll School of Management at Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA (USA). He holds a BA (Phi Beta Kappa) from Rutgers University, and an MBA from Boston University, and has achieved the designation of Certified Management Consultant (CMC) from the Institute of Management Consultants (USA).