

Critical Thinking

Information for the Leadership Advisory Board



Most believe critical thinking to be a task left to those in leadership. When in reality it's a task that most of us should be engaged in for most activities. Critical thinking, according to Brookfield and Knox (1987), means calling into question the very assumptions underlying customary habitual ways of thinking and acting, and then being ready to think and act differently on the basis of this critical questioning. Regardless of circumstances or positions in life, critical thinking should become an integral part of adult life so that informed decisions can be made.

Critical thinking offers opportunities for individuals to avoid making common errors of groupthink when working in teams. Groupthink distorts thinking to the point of members making irrational decisions and ill-advised decisions. During the decision-making process alternatives and procedures can be missed.

Why think "critically"? As an important part in adult life, it allows for all alternatives to be considered to best meet the needs of the individual and of the situation. Critical thinking also assists in validating norms within a culture and supports the development of creative solutions for life decisions.

How does it happen? Those that indulge in problem solving are half-way through the process of critical thinking. Where do the two intersect? Once the problem has been identified, then comes time to consider what the root cause is and how it should be solved. That means involving several skills. Those include:

- Effective listening: keeping an open mind while listening for ideas and facts
- Self-regulation: governance with decision-making and thought process
- Critical questioning: allows for reflection & eliciting underlying assumptions
- Analysis: relate events, people, resources
- Evaluation: determining what is feasible and how well it works

These skills lead you to defining the root cause of the problem, what possible solutions exist, which best meets the needs of the problem and finally how to improve the situation to avoid this problem the next time. Going through this process calls into question a lot of habitual behaviors, long-standing beliefs and attitudes that support our decisions. Critical think is not an easy task, but one well worth doing.

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Involves Affirmation. Due to the nature of "critical thinking," many are intimidated because they feel uncomfortable volunteering thoughts contrary to what the group believes. By supporting change and showing respect for others with actions and words, an environment is then open for critical thinking and the solutions that result from it. Encourage others in your work group to "think outside the box."

Based in emotion. Emotions are tied to most everything we do, so it is natural that emotions are present in the process of "critical thinking." Some times these emotions drive the questions that find the best solutions for all involved. These emotions are also tied to the values and beliefs that underlie most of the habitual behavior that we exhibit. If you challenge this behavior, you challenge those beliefs; thus be prepared to deal with them.

Success in Critical Thinking. Success in critical thinking begins with a desire to change for the organization and the individuals involved. Be willing to accept the pleasant and the unpleasant. By doing so you open the door to make others feel welcomed and to gain experience as well as information. That information can assist you in many ways and becomes another essential element in the process. Resolutions to problems come from the information that you seek out. Additionally, it is easier to get to the root cause of problems if you gather information. By scrutinizing your behavior and that of organizations, you can learn a lot that can help you resolve problems. Do not be afraid to try new things. If nothing else becomes habit, that should.