

Critical Thinking Skills for that Business Advantage¹

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A former U.S. Secretary of Labor was asked where he would spend federal funds if he had just one shot at improving America's labour force. His reply was simple: "Thinking skills."⁵

Effective and efficient thinking is made up of a number of types of thinking including critical, creative, kinetic, meditative, and instinctive thinking. And It's a reasonable presumption that organizations with employees who exhibit a full range of cognitive or thinking skills are more likely to be successful.

Critical thinking plays an integral role in large part for the following three reasons:

1. Effective critical thinking skills serve an executive function that sets the stage for the application of other types of cognitive skills.
2. Strong critical thinking abilities are fundamental to the tasks inherent in organizations and business.
3. These skills can be learned and improved.

What exactly is critical thinking? Essentially it's a way of thinking characterized by always identifying and challenging the assumptions involved in the process.

Critical thinking is purposeful, self-regulatory judgement which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgement is based.¹

Critical thinkers are aware that practices, structures, and actions are never context-free, and understanding how the situation and environments affect a problem or issue is an essential component of thinking.² Critical thinking uses methods to imagine and explore alternatives to the question at hand. This leads to good thinkers being skeptical when they continuously ask "why" to scrutinize goals, objectives, policies, and procedures.

Individuals with good critical thinking skills are characterized as:

- Well-informed and habitually inquisitive
- Trustful of reason and confident in their ability to reason
- Open-minded and willing to understand others
- Flexible
- Honest if facing personal biases
- Prudent in suspending judgement
- Willing to reconsider.

¹ This article appeared in Corporate Training Monthly, 2004, May.

Within business and industry, familiar aspects of critical thinking are recognizable as effective strategic planning, decision-making, creative problem-solving, situational leadership, and team building. These methods promote the features of innovation, flexibility, and creativity. These characteristics are identified by Peters and Waterman as indicators of excellence in their study of ten top American corporations.³

Examples of Critical Thinking ⁴	Examples of Non-Critical Thinking
"I do better in jobs where I'm expected to think things out for myself." "I try to see the value of another person's opinion, even though I may reject it later." "Making intelligent decisions is more important than winning arguments."	"I prefer jobs where my supervisor tells me exactly what to do." "I don't waste time looking things up." "I don't like to think about it too much, I just go on gut feel."

While individual qualities and capacities certainly contribute to critical thinking abilities, they are also impacted by contextual factors within the work environment itself.

It is tempting to assume that jobs requiring routine, repetitive behaviours performed in the same station (e.g., a manufacturing line) may not need critical thinking.

While it is unlikely that individuals possessing strong critical thinking abilities would be drawn to, or remain satisfied with such routine, this does not mean that these skills are not useful and worth fostering. There are many demonstrations of the positive effect on morale and productivity when line workers are given the opportunity to participate in decision making and problem solving.

Nevertheless, it is important to match the thinking abilities of the employee to the requirements of the position.

Implementing Critical Thinking Strategies

Step 1: Attain Top-Level Commitment

The first step of this process is to attain the commitment of top leaders in the organization. This serves two purposes: to have the leadership communicate that critical thinking within the organization is valued and to afford the leadership with the opportunity to model critical thinking in their own decision making.

Step 2: Assess and Select

Using high-quality assessment methodology, job applicants can be selected for their ability to use critical thinking on the job. This helps ensure that positions that benefit from critical thinking are filled by people

who actually exhibit the desired ability. Correspondingly, job analyses need to consider the degree and type of thinking skills that are likely to be required for a particular position.

Step 3: Develop the Skills

The evidence is clear that critical thinking can be developed through training. It is unlikely that typical seminar methods involving reading and didactic lectures will be effective. Rather, instructional methods are more likely to be effective when they require participants to enact new thinking behaviour and to practice and integrate skills and behaviour. Training in critical thinking skills is teaching a skill that is generalizable and whose value can be observed widely across many facets of the organization.

Critical thinking can be learned and its existence can have broad implications. Most recently, Springer & Borthick^{6 7} found that teaching critical thinking skills to accounting students resulted in significantly improved performance, particularly for the low-achieving student. In this case, those business students for whom this was most effective saw their grades rise by one grade level.

Step 4: Put It into Practice

Having the skills does not necessarily mean that employees will be predisposed to use them. It is essential that organizations start to remove conformity and the fear of appearing foolish in the workplace.⁸ It is important that organizational culture move towards openness and the desire to ask "why" with the intent of valuing inquisitiveness as a method to ensure competitive advantage and business success.

Encouraging staff to develop critical thinking skills means that current business goals and procedures are likely to be challenged. If this challenge is accepted and valued within an environment that values learning, it can only lead to improved business practice.

"A great many people think they are thinking when they are rearranging their prejudices" – William James



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³ Peters, T. and Waterman, R. *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass. 1981.

⁴ Adapted from Facione, Peter. *Critical Thinking: What It Is and Why It Counts*. Millbrae, California Academic Press. 1998.

⁵ Hale, Guy. *The Leader's Edge: Mastering The Five Skills of Breakthrough Thinking*. New York: Irwin Professional Publishing. 1996

⁶ Springer, C.W. and Borthick, A.F. Business Simulation to Stage Critical Thinking in Introductory Accounting: Rationale, Design and Implementation. *Issues in Accounting Education* 19(2). 2004

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⁸ Adapted from Travis, Carol. *Conversations with Critical Thinkers*, John Esterle and Dan Clurman (Eds.). Whitman Institute. San Francisco, CA. 1993