

THE IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL THINKING

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“The essence of the independent mind lies not in what it thinks, but in how it thinks.”

--- Christopher Hitchens

Exactly what is critical thinking? According to Robert Ellis, author of *The Path of Objectivity*, critical thinking is reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe and what to do. Many of us do not realize our capacity for developing critical thinking. Numerous studies have shown that leaders who practice critical thinking are better able to adapt to the variables that may present within a constantly changing marketplace and competitive business environment. Critical thinking empowers employees, managers and individuals to learn from their mistakes, identify opportunities and overcome challenges both inside and outside of the workplace.

Developing our critical thinking skills requires a conscious and consistent commitment to challenge ourselves to be less judgmental, to think outside the box, to be empathic, and to change our habitual thought processes. Critical thinking is simply a deliberative thought process and includes a number of core strategies such as:

- **Keep An Open Mind:** Appreciate that your own opinions and judgments may be wrong. It is important to challenge your automatic thinking. Redefine the way you see things by attaching a different meaning to see how that would change your approach to the situation. When we redefine the way we see things turning negatives into positives, dead-ends into new beginnings, mistakes into opportunities to learn, we may then find new solutions, strategies and methods to employ.
- **Challenge Assumptions:** Yours and those of others. Don't make assumptions. Asking questions, reframing problems and challenging assumptions are part of a critical thinker's learning process. One question I always ask my clients is: What other explanations could there be for this behavior, incident, or issue?
- **Consider Multiple Perspectives:** Take into consideration the importance of evaluating multiple perspectives. Because each of us attach meaning to situations based on our own experiences there will always be different perspectives about any particular situation. Consider these before you respond or react.
- **Research and Explore:** Actively seek information. Make sure you have gathered all the necessary information. Determine if there is any conflict in the evidence? Examine implications and consequences of a belief or action. Systematically think through all questions. Identify what exactly is the problem or issue.
- **Clarification:** Clarification is another strategy to hone your critical thinking skills. Be clear about what your views are whether you write them or orally express them. In doing this, focus on stating what you are saying in an explicit and precise manner, provide clear examples of what you mean; and use metaphors, analogies, or visualizations to help illustrate what you mean.

- **Taking Action:** Evaluate your options for action. What can be done in the short term? In the long term? Distinguish problems you can control from those problems that are beyond your control. To avoid the risk of serious negative consequences, it is important to make decisions which are carefully weighted and reasoned on all the evidence gathered and evaluated.

A key point to keep in mind, when using strategies to develop your critical thinking skills, is that you must be open to testing new ideas as each situation presents itself. Look for opportunities to integrate these strategies into your thinking and in all aspects of your life. The ability to recognize opportunities where others see problems comes from critical thinking. Critical thinkers tend to lead others with greater skill and direction which leads to timely and successful results. Begin applying your critical thinking skills today!

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