



Thinking about Critical Thinking

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Critical thinking is expanding the mind to more fully understand a situation. It involves analyzing, organizing, interpreting, making decisions about and communicating information. In a business context, critical thinking is applied to pressing issues and challenges to achieve better results. We believe it is a prerequisite for problem solving and decision making.

Great Circle Learning's critical thinking training programs are designed to move business professionals from cocksure ignorance to wise uncertainty. To explain: successful business people are highly knowledgeable about their industry and the business challenges they face. They are also usually very self-confident. As a result, they are often very sure of themselves as regards their analysis of situations. And yet, they are not immune from making mistakes that are costly to their businesses, such as misjudging risks and missing opportunities.

Why does this happen to otherwise sharp, bright people who are often recognized as leaders? Because of cocksure ignorance – they are so sure of themselves they don't take the time to examine issues more fully. Said another way, they don't know what they don't know. Critical thinking increases their knowledge and understanding of the issues, and results in *wise uncertainty* – which we define as a combination of experience and knowledge and the ability to apply them judiciously. Decisions made and actions taken within the context of wise uncertainty are inevitably different than they would have been if critical thinking had not been applied.

Our critical thinking model is comprised of five distinct modes of thinking:

- Active thinking, which uses a structured approach for immediate results.
- Strategic thinking, which takes a longer-term view that considers outside influences.
- Systems thinking, which searches for interrelationships among issues.
- Emotional thinking, which taps into our intuitive, more visceral ways of knowing.
- Quantum thinking, which propels us to consider a range of unknown possibilities.



More on active thinking...

Active Thinking is about solving immediate problems and producing results. It is where we live most of the time. It asks the question, what needs to be done now? It is logical and analytical, and it looks for facts and data. Active thinking is what we are most encouraged to do at work, and what we are most rewarded for.

Active thinking means getting involved mentally in solving problems, analyzing issues and situations, and determining short-term actions and directions. It is a highly personal thinking process, influenced by our past behaviors, experiences, education, and learning. It is primarily characterized by analytical, logical, and sequential thinking because it is oriented toward producing immediate results. When managing a team of people you must consider the motives behind each individual's active thinking decisions.

More on strategic thinking...

Strategic thinking is hypothetical thinking about possible future scenarios. It takes a longer view and is more broad-based; it uses external scenarios – future events and occurrences that would have major impacts on strategic decisions. It asks the questions, what might happen, and what else might happen? It requires that you think about the impact of decisions, as well as the consequences and outcomes of those decisions. Judgment regarding likelihood is suspended during this process. Once done, active thinking comes into play to ask questions like: how likely is each of these scenarios, and what's our plan for dealing with the most likely of these? This process of thinking about possible future scenarios followed by planning for the more likely possibilities comprises true strategic planning. Making a plan for the future without considering possible future scenarios first is not *strategic*.

Royal Dutch Shell's group planning staff began running "what if" scenarios in 1972, and followed up by detailing contingency plans to address some of the more likely scenarios. As a result, they survived the Middle East oil embargo in 1973.

More on systems thinking...

Systems thinking involves looking at as many of the influencing factors as you can. It is about knowing how past, present, and future conditions influence our thinking and decisions. In other words, it is looking beyond the immediate context of your situation to consider the larger picture. The term is derived from Bertalanffy's Theory of General Systems and has been made popular by Peter Senge and other contemporary business writers and consultants.

Official U.S. foreign policy regarding the China/Taiwan situation has up to now reflected a systems thinking approach. We have been deliberately vague about



whether we would step in to help Taiwan if China became aggressive towards her. (By the way, anticipating this scenario involves strategic thinking). Recently, however, President Bush responded to a reporter's question on this issue by stating that we have a responsibility to protect Taiwan.

This response caused an uproar among more systems-savvy thinkers. In their view, the President did not take into account how China might interpret his answer: Are we issuing a veiled threat? Nor did he consider what signal his response might send to Taiwan: Does this mean they don't have to tread carefully with China because the U.S. will step in and defend them if anything goes wrong? From a systems thinking perspective, the President's answer concentrated only on the immediate context of U.S./Taiwan relations without considering the larger picture.

More on quantum thinking...

Quantum thinking derives from quantum physics; which, in physics, is a way to describe the dynamic properties of subatomic particles. Quantum thinking is about taking leaps in our thinking to explore the potential of being and doing something new and/or different. It involves finding a different reality – the parallel, multiple universe reality for our issue or situation.

Looking to physics to help explain what we mean: Light, for instance, was discovered to be both a particle and a frequency, by two different scientists, at different points in time. So today scientists know that, depending on they look at/examine light, it will display different characteristics that will lead to different conclusions about what light is, how to manage it, etc.

In the same way, there may well be “another reality” for our issue or situation that we are oblivious to because we are simply locked in to our own ways of perceiving. So, one way to help break out of your patterns of perceiving is to ask yourself: What wouldn't you do? And, WHY NOT?

Examples of quantum thinking in business include Amazon.com and automatic teller machines (ATM).

More on emotional thinking...

Emotional thinking considers the many facets of human emotion that contribute to the ways in which we communicate, make decisions, solve problems, and generally “do” in life. It draws upon groundbreaking brain and human behavior research, which establishes a vital link between emotional aptitude and one's propensity for personal and professional success.

Psychologist Daniel Goleman, in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, points out that emotional thinking comprises “a set of traits – some might call it character – that matters immensely for our personal destiny. Emotional life is a domain that, as



surely as math or reading, can be handled with greater or lesser skill, and requires its unique set of competencies. And how adept a person is at those competencies is crucial to understanding why one person thrives in life while another, of equal intellect, dead-ends.” Emotional aptitude is a meta-ability, determining how well we can use whatever other skills we possess.

Emotional thinking is that reaction we feel but have no words for. Active thinking wants us to cast that reaction aside, because there doesn't appear to be any logical basis for it, or because there's no apparent data to support it. Yet, in fact, physiologically, we feel before we think. Our brains are wired such that our emotions come first – the fight or flight response, before the cognitive thinking part of the brain kicks in.

Let's go back to President Bush for a minute to illustrate this concept. When the President responded to that reporter's question by saying that we have a responsibility to defend Taiwan, he may well have been expressing *what he felt*. Had he had the time to *think* about it, he might have responded differently.

So what does this all mean?

Each distinct mode of critical thinking brings unique and valuable perspective to any one situation or challenge. Using all five modes of critical thinking enriches our knowledge and understanding, which in turn improves our ability to judiciously take the most appropriate next step. Using only one or two modes of thinking can leave us with a lopsided, incomplete perspective and increases the likelihood that we will make mistakes, misjudge risks, and just plain not see opportunities.

In the spirit of critical thinking, which is all about asking questions, expanding our perceptions and challenging our assumptions, take a few minutes to ask yourself some questions about your business:

- What will happen if we primarily use active thinking?
- How often do we take the time to consider longer term outside influences?
- When would considering interrelationships among seemingly unrelated issues have mattered and caused us to act differently?
- What happens when somebody *has a feeling* about something? How often do I find myself reflecting on the fact that I had a feeling about something that's come to pass?
- Why should we consider unknown possibilities? Who else will?
- How will using critical thinking benefit me and my business?

There's always more to think about!