

Do You Continually Improve Your Critical Thinking?

By: Roger M. Ingbretsen

Before answering this question, you may want a definition of critical thinking? Critical thinking is a conscious evaluation of your thoughts. It is thinking about your thinking. It is the conscious act of directing your thinking to be more accurate, clear, rational and consistent with actual facts and conditions. It is a search for knowledge and truth.

Your first reaction maybe: I do that! I am a rational person who thinks before I act. Hold that thought... Another reaction might be: Wait! In today's hectic world with everything coming at me so fast, I cannot take the time to think about what I think. I react on gut instinct. Hold that thought also... Another reaction might be: I do not get paid to think I get paid to do. Perhaps you may even respond to the question with something like this: Life is so complicated, complex and demanding that I would suffer from analysis paralysis if I stopped to really think critically about my thinking and its related decision making process.

All of the above reactions, and more, are both very normal and often fitting responses depending on the given situation. Every day you are called upon to make thought-provoking decisions both in your private life as well as in your place of employment. Life is largely unpredictable and uncontrollable, so attempting to apply critical thought to everything is simply not realistic. So the question becomes, can you still incorporate critical thinking skills where possible, so you can make better, or more informed decisions on a more frequent basis. Consider applying the following whenever and wherever possible.

Many decisions are not simply based on black and white easy answers, and right or wrong thinking. There are, in fact, very few absolutes. The truth or best answer for most things in life lies somewhere in the middle, not at the extreme ends of the spectrum. Most often, there are shades of gray. So you should strive for depth of thought, being open to additional knowledge. Strive to learn how to think rather than what to think. Look for more evidence and additional information from alternative sources. Question your beliefs and resist your urge to answer quickly.

Get in the habit of stopping to evaluate your first reaction to a statement or situation. Often, your first reaction is based on your beliefs, feelings, life experiences and your preconceived concept about a particular subject. You may even allow your emotions about a subject or even your feelings about the person delivering the information get in the way and sway your thinking. These are all perfectly normal starting points for your thinking. However, that is all they should be, starting points.

Critical thinking truly is about suspending your current thinking and exploring new possibilities. It is about restating the question or problem so you are as clear on the issue as possible. Yes, it is true many problems are vague. Do not assume your perception of the problem is correct. To the greatest extent possible, be very clear on the problem. When you become more questioning, actively exploring and probing for new information, and suspending quick closure to your thinking, your chance of making a better and more informed decision increases.

Critical thinking truly is about suspending your current thinking and exploring new possibilities. When you start to apply these critical thinking techniques, the process will help you learn more about your own thinking, assumptions, biases, beliefs and knowledge; while at the same time yielding better decisions.

As a knowledgeable person in today's information age, your critical thinking skills will become more important than ever before. So, stop -think about what you are thinking. Set aside your assumptions and "vast" knowledge. Begin the process of questioning your long-held beliefs and become open to new possibilities. Using the following checklist, improve your critical thinking skills. It will result in you making better and more informed decisions in the future.

10 Steps to Mastering Critical Thinking Skills

1. Suspend your judgment and closure based on initial reaction.
2. Examine your initial feelings, emotions and reactions.
3. Deal rationally with the facts, not irrationally with perception.
4. Be fair, suspending personalities from the issue.
5. Gather information so you are better informed.
6. Clarify the issue; a problem well understood is half solved.
7. Use an inquiring mindset and remain open to all possibilities.
8. Evaluate the evidence with a questioning and open mind.
9. Consider alternatives, all things are not black and white.
10. Select the best solution -the one that serves the greatest good.

When critical thinking fails to occur, the solution will always be weaker than it could have been.