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THE WAY WE'RE WIRED

CRITICAL
THINKING
MEANS
BUSINESS

Does the
Internet Make
You Smarter or
Dumber?

CRITICAL THINKING MEANS BUSINESS

By Heather Ishikawa and Chad Fife



When more than 400 senior HR professionals were asked in a survey to name the most important skill their employees will need in the next five years, critical thinking ranked the highest—surpassing innovation or the application of information technology. Such a response reflects how dramatically the nature of work—and the skills required—have been changing. With globalization and the increased speed of business, employees at every level are facing an increasingly complex flow of information. Work settings are changing rapidly, and employees are moving into new roles, often with limited direction.

Employees can no longer rely on others to make key decisions. They often must make them on their own, and quickly. And the decisions have to be good ones. If they fall short, there may be no time to recover. Good decisions require focusing on the most relevant information, asking the right questions, and separating reliable facts from false assumptions—all elements of critical thinking. And, yet, too few employees possess these essential skills. A survey of HR professionals conducted by SHRM and The Conference Board found that a full 70 percent of employees with a high school education were deficient in critical-thinking skills. Even among employees with a four-year college education, nine percent were deficient in critical-thinking skills, 63 percent had adequate skills, and only 28 percent were rated excellent critical thinkers.

Many business leaders also come up short. Senior executive-development professionals report that the competency that next-generation leaders lack the most is strategic thinking, which hinges on critical-thinking skills. Many next-generation leaders also lack the ability to create a vision or to understand the total enterprise and how the parts work together—both competencies that are closely tied to critical thinking. What can be done? Once organizations understand the role of critical thinking in everyday decision-making, they can begin to take steps to develop these skills in their leaders and employees.

CRITICAL THINKING—WHAT IS IT?

Before we can develop critical thinking, we need to clarify what it is. Critical thinking is not the act of being critical or confrontational. Critical thinking can be defined as:

- Thinking logically with clarity and precision so that you can recognize assumptions
- Using an approach that is objective and accurate to evaluate arguments
- Focusing on information that is relevant to draw conclusions

Here are some examples of critical thinking in action:

Nurses need critical thinking skills when evaluating the rapidly changing condition of a patient. They must be able to accurately assess the information at hand and make the right decisions for the patient's well-being.

Football coaches need to put aside emotions to make the best choice for the next play, such as overconfidence in a favorite player or perhaps anger at a referee's bad call. Critical thinking provides a clear picture of the best options.

Salespeople often make the mistake of focusing on what they can provide their clients, rather than what the clients are really looking for. By thinking critically, however, salespeople can better recognize the need to consider all points of view.

THINK BETTER WITH RED

Fortunately, critical thinking can be taught. Pearson has developed the RED Model—Recognize Assumptions, Evaluate Arguments, Draw Conclusions—as a way to view and apply critical thinking principles. This model is particularly helpful in critical-thinking training programs where employees apply the model to real business problems. Each of these critical thinking skills fits together in a process that is both fluid and sequential.

Here's what each RED skill looks like:

- **Recognize assumptions.** This is the ability to separate fact from opinion. It is deceptively easy to listen to a comment or presentation and assume the information presented is true even though no evidence is given to back it up. Perhaps the speaker is particularly credible or trustworthy, or the information makes sense or matches our own view. We just don't question it. Noticing and questioning assumptions helps to reveal information gaps or unfounded logic. Taking it a step further, when

we examine assumptions through the eyes of different people (e.g., the viewpoint of different stakeholders), the end result is a richer perspective on a topic.



“R” questions to ask:

- What is the key issue/problem you are trying to solve?
- What information, facts, and evidence do you have about this issue?
- Who are the key stakeholders, and what are their viewpoints?
- What other ideas should be explored?
- **Evaluate arguments.** It is difficult to suspend judgment and systematically walk through arguments and information with the impartiality of a Sherlock Holmes. The art of evaluating arguments entails analyzing information objectively and accurately, questioning the quality of supporting evidence, and understanding how emotion influences the situation. People may quickly come to a conclusion simply to avoid conflict. Being able to remain objective and sort through the validity of different positions helps people draw more accurate conclusions.

“E” questions to ask:

- What are your biases?
- Who would disagree with your proposed solution, and what is their rationale?
- What key points and perspectives do you need to keep in mind as you evaluate the options?
- What will be the financial or other impacts of your decision?

- **Draw conclusions.** People who possess this skill are able to bring diverse information together to arrive at conclusions that logically follow from the available evidence, and they do not inappropriately generalize beyond the evidence. Furthermore, they will change their position when the evidence warrants doing so. They are often characterized as having “good judgment” because they typically arrive at a quality decision.

“D” questions to ask:

- What specific evidence is driving your conclusion?
- Is there new evidence that would impact your decision?
- What is the timeline for making a decision (e.g., would your decision be different in a month)?

GET RECERTIFIED.

Now that you have received your HR certification, the next step is to maintain your credential(s) through recertification.

Recertification is easier than you think:

- Start the recertification application early.
- Record each of your recertification credit hours as they are earned.
- Earn more recertification credit hours for each category. In the event that a recertification activity is not approved, you will have additional hours to complete the recertification process.



Kristi West, SPHR-CA, GPHR

DON'T WAIT. START YOUR RECERTIFICATION PROCESS TODAY.

Begin by logging on to your online profile and record your recertification credit hours. If you have questions, connect with our recertification team on our blog—*Recert Connection* at www.hrci.org/blog

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- What risks are associated with your conclusion?

Although this process is fluid, it is helpful to focus on each of the RED skills individually when practicing skill development.

IDENTIFY & DEVELOP GOOD CRITICAL THINKERS

Research conducted by Pearson, as well as by a variety of independent

academics, has shown that people who score well on a critical-thinking assessment are also rated by their supervisors as having:

- Good analysis and problem-solving skills
- Good judgment and decision-making
- Good overall job performance
- The ability to evaluate the quality of information presented
- Creativity

- Job knowledge
- The potential to move up within the organization

One of the most widely used assessments is the Watson-Glaser™ Critical Thinking Appraisal. Watson-Glaser offers a hard-skills appraisal with scores based on the RED model and is suited for people in professional and managerial positions. To develop an existing employee's critical thinking skills, portals such as Pearson's Critical Thinking University have been developed to take users through real-world business scenarios, such as "When Facts Fail," "Power of Persuasion," and "What's the Alternative?"

TRAINING YOUR STAFF TO THINK CRITICALLY IS A NO-BRAINER

More and more employers are taking steps to help their employees develop critical thinking skills through training programs. Such programs can have as high as 17x ROI, and because critical thinking underlies problem solving, planning, creativity, and other skills, an employee's performance can soar.

Perhaps more than any other business skill, critical thinking can make the difference between success and failure, as every dollar an organization spends or receives is a direct result of a decision. Fortunately, these skills are not out of reach—they are readily available to employees at all levels through the RED model.

So what are you doing to develop critical thinking in your organization? To start, just think RED. 

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