

## Critical Thinking Skills can Level-Up Your Leadership

One of the most important skills you can learn is critical thinking. Too many people outsource their thinking to the TV, Internet and social media. Our society has become complacent. Critical thinking is what distinguishes humans from machines. Technological tools are becoming increasingly powerful and have already surpassed us in many ways. But with these skills, we possess something they will never have. We dominate the machines, thanks to our critical thinking.

Critical thinking is the ability to solve problems effectively by systematically gathering information about an issue, generating further ideas involving a variety of perspectives, evaluating the information using logic, and making sure everyone involved is on board. Thinking critically defines the process of analyzing problems from scratch, relying on a combination of your background, the context of your company, the people on your team, available resources, the global environment and any data you can tap into to reach a reasonable conclusion.

Simply put, traditional thinking is a down and dirty approach to decision making that does not account for the complete context to analyze a problem. Busy executives need to resort to proven approaches and established processes most of the time. Without critical thinking strategies, important initiatives can fail and jeopardize the entire business. The good news is that critical thinking skills can be learned and developed.

Critical thinking begins at home and then in our educational system where the concept gets imprinted as an informal medium for solving day to day problems. The difference between unaware thinkers and proficient critical thinkers determines whether you are running your life on autopilot or excel at balancing experience with context and different variables introduced for every problem. Research indicates that over time, students can lose their aptitude as they rely more on former experiences and known patterns instead of questioning paradigms and challenging themselves toward progress.

In business, new employees alter the dynamics of their company culture. New departments obtain and share responsibilities throughout the organization. New product divisions share costs and expenses with each other. Promotions for these products change the dynamics of the teams involved. And competitors become aggressive and acquire market share which leads many companies to make changes in their own products and services to keep up with market trends and client expectations.

The core responsibilities of business managers is to quickly identify larger initiatives that are dependent on many different factors and then determine how to allocate time and resources. These decisions are complex and many times require analysis from many different perspectives. This is why critical thinking can be a competitive advantage if your leadership team recognizes its importance.

**Top Skills for Critical Thinking:** Observation, Analysis, Interpretation, Reflection, Evaluation, Inference, Explanation, Problem solving, Decision making.

These skills are also important because they allow us to pick out the relevant information from the constant flow that we receive. Computers drown us in data, but it's up to us to analyze, evaluate, and judge its usefulness. Critical thinking therefore helps us from being manipulated.

Time management for example is critical due to the rate at which our digital world is expanding. By refusing to be distracted by the endless stream of notifications, texts, social media and emails, we are able to maintain our focus, grow our analytical skills and therefore, control our environment. Multitasking is overrated and scientific studies have shown that it really doesn't work. They have indicated that multitasking may actually hurt productivity.

A simple framework to use when faced with a complex decision is to follow this list of critical thinking activities:

- Gather requirements from different sources
- Critically assess the issue at hand
- Consider all arguments and stakeholders involved in the process
- List the assumptions and opinions
- Evaluate each and every opinion critically
- Perform a SWOT analysis to identify weak spots or flaws in your thinking
- Account for all implications or unintended consequences from the decision
- Provide a well thought out argument supporting the ideal solution

**As part of this framework, be sure to ask the following questions:**

Who

- Who benefits from this?
- Who is this harmful to
- Who makes decisions about this?
- Who is most directly affected?
- Who have you also heard discuss this?
- Who would be the best person to consult?
- Who will be the key person in this?
- Who deserves recognition for this?

What

- What are the strengths/weaknesses
- What is another perspective?
- What is another alternative?
- What would be a counter-argument?
- What is the best/worst case scenario?
- What is most/least important?
- What can we do to make a positive change?
- What is getting in the way of our action?

## Where

Where would we see this in the real world?  
Where are there similar concepts/situations?  
Where is there the most need for this?  
Where in the world would this be a problem?  
Where can we get more information?  
Where do we go for help with this?  
Where will this idea take us?  
Where are the areas for improvement?

## When

When is this acceptable/unacceptable?  
When would this benefit our society?  
When would this cause a problem?  
When is the best time to take action?  
When will we know we've succeeded?  
When has this played a part in our history?  
When can we expect this to change?  
When should we ask for help with this?

## Why

Why is this a problem/challenge?  
Why is it relevant to me/others?  
Why is this the best/worst scenario?  
Why are people influenced by this?  
Why should people know about this?  
Why has it been this way for so long?  
Why have we allowed this to happen?  
Why is there a need for this today?

## How

How is this similar to \_\_\_\_\_?  
How does this disrupt things?  
How do we know the truth about this?  
How will we approach this safely?  
How does this benefit us/others?  
How does this harm us/others?  
How do we see this in the future?  
How can we change this for our good?

Once you adopt an effective framework, switching between a quick burst of simple decisions and applying critical thinking will become a healthy habit. Here are just a few examples of when you can apply critical thinking:

- Launching a new product or service
- Promoting a team member
- Moving to a new office space

- Opening a new international branch
- Participating in a large trade show
- Creating a new employee engagement program
- Acquiring a competitor

Critical thinking can be a transformational shift for you personally and as a business leader in your company. Once you get used to the process and apply the framework outlined above, you will develop a healthier and more successful workplace environment, a loyal team and a successful business.

## **Ways to Promote Critical Thinking in the Workplace**

Some ways you can promote critical thinking in the workplace involve making changes in your workplace culture; others involve training. Here are five ways to encourage critical thinking in your organization.

### **1. Hire and Promote Critical Thinkers**

An important first step to building organizational strength in critical thinking is to hire individuals who are already strong in that area. Behavioral interviewing is an effective way to gauge a candidate's strengths in critical evaluation and analysis. In addition, when you make critical thinking a desired competency for leadership and promotion, you begin to build a pipeline of talented critical thinkers.

### **2. Build a Culture of Learning**

It's critical to create an environment where the behaviors related to critical thinking are a natural part of your company culture. Some of the ways you can build and support a culture that stimulates critical, objective analysis include:

- Incorporating "lessons learned" discussions after the conclusion of important projects, during which employees have the opportunity to look back on areas where more critical thinking might have been helpful in improving a project's outcome.
- Creating an environment where tough questions are welcomed and employees are encouraged to talk through alternatives openly.
- Developing a routine for decision-making that encourages critical thinking behaviors such as exploring possible solutions to a problem, exploring bias, and considering the consequences of different proposed solutions.

### **3. Avoid Jumping to Conclusions**

Another way to promote critical thinking in the workplace is to avoid jumping to conclusions. Instead, approach a problem by first developing a common understanding of the challenges it presents. You can start with the questions listed in the framework above.

#### 4. Create Internal Forums

Sometimes the simple act of talking things out can help to spur the critical, objective analysis of problems. When individuals have a forum for addressing and discussing one big problem or a series of related problems, they generate new ideas, share pros and cons of certain solutions, and take advantage of opportunities to collaborate with coworkers on creative solutions to workplace problems.

#### 5. Teach and Train

Leadership development and teamwork-skills training can help build employees' critical thinking strengths by encouraging a mind-set and skill-set change. As individuals learn new behaviors, they begin to see broader problems and solutions that exist beyond their individual roles and consider the larger picture when looking at a problem.

Experiential learning works particularly well in promoting critical thinking because learning by doing encourages a critical skill set. The immersive nature of an experiential approach keeps employees fully engaged so that they continually use their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Be an example to others!

### **Build Critical Thinking in the Whole Organization**

Critical thinking is more than a desirable soft skill; it's a valuable competency that is the basis for innovation and problem-solving. When properly cultivated in the workplace, critical thinking can help individuals and teams overcome challenges and meet business goals. Although there's no magic bullet that will increase critical thinking in the workplace, a variety of activities in combination can effectively promote it. When you build a culture that promotes and values critical thinking, your organization as a whole will see greater results and outcomes.

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#### **About the Author:**

Elias Amash, President of GRIP, is an industry veteran with more than 25 years of experience in global sourcing, manufacturing, distribution, retail merchandising, fulfillment, marketing, technology, and operations. He is a trusted partner to hundreds of retailers and has "leveled up" the industry with GRIP's undying commitment to offering only the highest levels of service to its customers. Amash has published several business books, *The Retail Advantage: How to Win the War with Amazon*, *Retail Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies and Why*, *The Future of Retail*, *Importing from China: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*, and *101 Bright Ideas: Winning Tactics to Increase Retail Sales*.

## **About GRIP:**

GRIP was incorporated by Charles Amash in 1980 and has grown into one of the nation's top suppliers of innovative products to the retail industry. Located just south of Grand Rapids, Michigan, GRIP features a 200,000 sq ft state of the art warehouse facility including a 2,000 sq ft product showroom. GRIP carries a product line of over 1,000 specialty tools, tarps, automotive, cargo control, cleaning, LED lighting, magnetics, outdoors, household items, impulse and general merchandise. GRIP has a proven track record of excellence in supplying retail clients with innovative products, timely fulfillment, and world-class customer support. At GRIP, everything is about earning your business...one customer at a time. It's about building relationships and fostering business partnerships that will last long into the future. Our goal is to have Customers for Life. The future at GRIP is exciting and we're hoping that you can be a part of it as one of our many Customers for Life.

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