

Article

Critical Thinking and Emerging Leaders



By Robert W. Wendover

Critical Thinking: *Thinking that involves the principled application of standards and criteria in the evaluation of practical and theoretical options for the purpose of reaching conclusions about those options.* (University of Idaho) Veteran managers often complain to me that young people lack common sense. What they mean, I suspect, is that these young people are either unwilling or unable to think critically to the level of the managers' expectations. But who can blame them? Those entering the workplace over the past 20 years are products of a society that has evolved dramatically since the era of *Father Knows Best*. These youngsters have been immersed in media, education and experiences that often conflict in meaning, each doing so with a veracity never before seen in American society. Parents, for instance, may teach their children one set of beliefs about hard work. But these children see significantly different interpretations around them on a daily basis. Right and wrong can also vary when society places an ever-increasing emphasis on shortcuts and convenience.

As emerging leaders mature into positions of responsibility, their approaches to critical thinking will depart from what older generations might consider conventional wisdom. Much of this departure can be attributed to three factors:

Menu Driven Thinking – Those coming of age in today's society have increasingly learned to use choice-based methodologies as their modus operandi for making day-to-day decisions. While those in older generations have learned to do the same, their backgrounds are steeped in the strategies they developed prior to the emergence of computers. Most young people can run circles around their older counterparts when it comes to manipulating the systems found in remotes, cell-phones and PCs. But the more authority one assumes as a leader, the less one uses technology as a basis for critical decision making. After all, other than gathering the facts, how can one evaluate practical and theoretical options when adjudicating staffing issues or choosing a new product to offer?

Veteran leaders instinctually resort to the skills and intuition they've developed and used for years. Emerging leaders are hindered by inexperience. This coupled with their bias

for making decisions via technology makes one wonder how their approaches will differ when making strategic decisions going forward.

Critical thinking is a combination of skills, wisdom, and confidence. In their recent book *Deep Smarts*, authors Dorothy Leonard and Walter Swap observe that “We know we are in the presence of deep smarts when we see an expert quickly size up a complex situation and come to a rapid decision – one that proves to be not just good, but wise.” But these decisions are not based on choices programmed by others, but by choices formulated by the decision-maker.

Relativism – The past four decades has seen a societal shift towards the belief that truth and moral values are not absolute but relative to the persons or groups holding them. Most of those over forty came of age being taught a rigid set of values and expectations and the consequences for not adhering to them. Those under 40 have increasingly come of age with values and expectations that seem to be based on what the individual chooses to believe. They have watched as corporate leaders are convicted of felonies, but walk away with millions. They have witnessed respected institutions being challenged by special interests over policies and beliefs that have been practiced for years. They are immersed in a media that seems to dramatize the smallest differences in social nuance thereby exaggerating these incidents’ impact on society as a whole.

Rather than growing up with an unyielding moral framework, many have learned that the end can justify the means even if their parents and elders taught them otherwise. Add to this the pressure for performance expected in today’s workplaces and it’s little wonder that they will struggle with right and wrong in the inevitable situations they will face as leaders.

Zero Tolerance Policies – As American society has experienced the demise of traditional community supports, the level of distrust among strangers has soared. This in turn has led to the promulgation of legislation and practices that attempt to fill the void left by this lack of community. This, of course, has been exacerbated by a media that seems intent on sensationalizing every horrific act without regard to the context of society. The tragedy of a kidnapping in one small town can become international news if the outcome is grizzly enough. The beating of a solitary child can be turned into a racial conflagration without regard to context. In response to this, politically motivated leaders rush to pass laws addressing every isolated anomaly.

One of the most popular devices that has emerged to assuage the fear generated by

this sensationalism has been the concept of zero tolerance. The public has watched endlessly as anomalous crimes become a cause celebre resulting in legislation which seeks to provide an airtight solution. While well-intentioned in all cases, most of these policies have proven marginally effective at best and arbitrary and capricious, at worst.

But the larger question is what impact these policies have on future leaders. The more we institute zero tolerance policies, the more we allow those in authority to relinquish their responsibility for making critical choices. Not only does zero tolerance remove viable options from decision-makers but also it arguably enables those lacking courage to avoid making critical decisions.

As emerging leaders ascend into roles of authority over the next decade, they are sure to approach decision making in ways that will run counter to some present practices. This, in turn, will impact strategy and execution in a variety of arenas. The traditional means of setting direction, handling corporate crises, dealing with labor relations, coping with regulatory dilemmas, and other facets will all be affected by these individuals as they seek to apply their own approaches to critical thinking. How? Only time will tell.

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