

The Critical Nature of Critical Thinking

By Linda D. Henman, Ph.D.

Authors have filled the shelves with books about leadership personality, charisma, and emotional intelligence. Arguably, leadership is a complicated and somewhat abstract concept. Therefore, before making a hiring or promotion decision, successful companies consider a candidate's education, experience, behavior during the interview, references, and personal impressions. But too often, they overlook the critical factor that separates those who can succeed at the top of organizations from those who cannot: advanced critical thinking skills.

What is critical thinking?

Definitions of critical thinking vary, but in nearly every instance, the explanation addresses gathering information, evaluating it, and accurately drawing assumptions about it. For the purpose of this discussion, I offer this:

Critical thinking is a disciplined process for conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information gathered from observation, experience, and reasoning. It is based on clarity, accuracy, consistency, relevance, depth, breadth, and fairness.

Critical thinking philosophy traces its roots back thousands of years to Buddhism and the Greek Socratic tradition that involved asking probing questions to determine whether claims to knowledge could be rationally justified with logical consistency. When people do well in critical thinking, they clarify goals, examine assumptions, evaluate evidence, and assess conclusions. When they don't, they squander their time and that of others on inconsequential activities.

When making difficult decisions, an individual or group engaged in strong critical thinking gives due consideration to careful observation and the relevance of arguments. These skills allow these people to venture into the realm of the unknown. They may not understand the specific details of the new situations, but because they can weigh information and analyze it effectively, they excel in uncharted seas. These people also typically show a willingness to tackle problems and decisions that demand their skill set.

Critical Thinking in Business

Advanced critical thinking skills is the voice; willingness to put this ability into action is the echo. The two must work in tandem. Sometimes, but not often, I assess a candidate for hire or promotion who demonstrates well-honed skills for analytical reasoning but not the track record or motivation to act on this talent. Why? The simple answer is logic makes us think, but emotion makes us act.

People who have the ability to think logically but behave emotionally show no more promise than those who don't have the ability to start with. Dispassion and an ability to function in the arena of the abstract stand at the core of advanced critical thinking. People who can maintain this kind of global perspective can engage in long-rang strategic planning, simultaneously process information from a variety of sources, and multi-task. In addition to excelling at troubleshooting themselves, they can serve as strong sounding boards to others who struggle with complex or unfamiliar problems. Further, they possess a kind of internal crystal ball—a knack for seeing into the future to anticipate consequences and plan for contingencies.

Others often notice the *results* of advanced critical thinking without realizing that's what they're doing. Strong critical thinkers are often the most productive people in the organization because they zero in on the critical few while putting aside the trivial many. In other words, they prioritize and address important issues before using their time and resources on activities that don't matter. They don't work more hours than other people. On the contrary, often they work fewer, but they work smarter. They get to the core of complicated issues, and then use dispassionate scrutiny to solve problems and make decisions.

Sometimes the *absence* of critical thinking skills becomes obvious in a leader's ultimate downfall. Underdeveloped critical thinking skills may help to explain the demise of Carly Fiorina, the ousted CEO of Hewlett-Packard. Fiorina, whom *Fortune* named the most powerful woman in business in 1998, lost her job at Hewlett-Packard just six years later. The company's controversial deal to buy Compaq in the spring of 2002—after a bruising proxy fight led by one of the Hewlett family heirs—did not produce the shareholder returns or profits she had promised.

Fiorina either failed to anticipate the implications of and obstacles to her decision to buy Compaq, or she simply didn't pursue feedback that may have revealed errors in her judgment or resistance to her plan. Had she explored multiple perspectives, particularly those of the Hewlett family, she may have been able to identify probable consequences and to avert the temporary plummet in HP stock, widespread job losses, and her own downfall. Both HP and Fiorina paid for her weak leadership intelligence.

Conclusion

Nature or nurture? Experts continue to disagree about the origins of intelligence, but this much seems clear. By the time someone applies for a position at your company—whether for employment or promotion—he or she has demonstrated the level of critical thinking skills you can expect. They don't tend to change. Those who have well-developed skills will have a track record of success in school or work. They will have evidenced success, because throughout their lives, they have sensed what will help or hinder the accomplishment of their goals. Their credit scores will be good, and you'll find in the interview, they can think on their feet. When asked to

explain both sides of a controversial or touchy subject, they will be able to offer convincing arguments on both sides, even the one with which they disagree.

After conducting thousands of pre-employment and succession planning screenings for hundreds of different clients, I can say unequivocally that *critical thinking* is the most important but the least understood criterion decision makers should consider. In the upper echelons of the organization, I have found it to be the single most significant success factor. Not everyone in your organization needs to possess stellar critical thinking skills, but the ones that will run it must.

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