



Critical reflection: thoughts that know their thinker

Columnist: Mandy Lamkin, Enrich Australia director

Critical thinking is not just how you react to your 16-year-old's communication skills, though it could be useful in trying to decipher them. And rather than being one of those professional development competencies you doubt will directly affect your income, critical thinking saves you time and potentially a lot of money.

To begin with, knowing how to efficiently analyse and reliably sift through the tonnes of material that heads your way every week is reason enough to acquire the skills associated with critical thinking. Moreover, it is almost unmatched as a mechanism for an 'audit trail' for explaining or justifying your thinking around decisions. And if you apply critical thinking to the appraisal of ethical issues or writing proposals, you can make clear and more convincing arguments for your own position.

WHAT IS CRITICAL THINKING?

It is one thing to assimilate material so we know if it's valuable to us, but quite another to overlay a disinterested perspective while we are doing it. This is because humans tend to evaluate almost everything that crosses their path with self-interest, which can significantly diminish its potential.

Critical thinking is a process that allows an encounter with all kinds of information to be objective; it's similar to having an alternative inquisitive voice in your head other than the one carrying out the interaction. The job of this other voice is to ask certain questions, enabling its owner to evaluate or scan in a way that will assist in coming to terms with the relevance, or not, of the issues being presented.

A practical way of looking at it might be to explain that if I'm thinking critically about something I'm reading or hearing, I am also doing some or all of the following:

- scanning for the pros and cons of the material's content (in general or in relation to my need),

- looking for limitations and flaws in the material's argument or reasoning,
- noticing when the argument being presented is reinforced or may break down,
- finding the possible motivation of the author or their principles that emerge from between the lines, and
- observing any automatic acceptance or prejudice I may have, either to the content or the speaker/author of the information that may affect my true insight about it.

Hence, some of the questions I might also ask while this is going on might be:

- Is the information accurate and valid?
- Are there any contradictions or gaps in the proposition or position the writer is taking?
- Are there any inconsistencies in the reasoning, or is an agenda hidden in the writer's language?
- Do the concepts being presented connect overall?
- Is the intended point proven? Am I convinced – even to any extent?
- Does the writer rehash other people's concepts and thoughts to try to make or reinforce their argument?
- If they do use others' thoughts, does the author assert their relevance or validity to their argument?

Critical thinking hence does not mean you automatically reject an argument being presented. Rather, you know why you may or may not accept it and, importantly, can articulate your reasoning for doing so. When you think about the number of times in a day you have to justify your own work or evaluate others', the potential objectivity that critical thinking skills produce is very clear. They also help you make a case to people who don't share your technical knowledge, such as clients, when it comes to explaining the content of their statement of advice.

CRITICAL REFLECTION

Having expertise in critical thinking is not even the best part of the story. To think

critically in a way that makes a difference we need to put aside the shadow of our personal conditioning that tends to affect the clarity with which we see and act on our insights. The effectiveness of the ongoing inner monologue, "What do I think about this?", requires self-awareness as well as detachment to be productive. This is where reflection kicks in.

To allow this reflective function to work well, time away from busyness and noise has to be found. The brain recognises this time out as an opportunity to elasticise and respond flexibly to generate more abstract or lateral thinking than what it tends to be asked to produce under day-to-day pressures. The reflection process also produces capacities for more refined listening and better concentration.

When allowing reflective practice to facilitate critical thinking, the thinker is more objective and aware of how the thoughts are being produced, as well as the cognitive environment producing them. Reflective practice can also open up lateral (abstract) thinking. You can observe and distinguish what happens to you and how it makes you feel – two related but very separate prospects. With this perspective on things, your feelings, stress, anxiety and other states of mind can also be more manageable as, perhaps for the first time, we see them as a product of the mind and not an intrinsic or fixed part of it.

Ours is a working society that values productivity above just about everything else. But what might otherwise be viewed as valueless time away from the grindstone, time out where reflective critical thinking is applied can prove itself to be the difference between management and leadership, and reactionary activity and true productivity.

What sets you and your thinking apart is what makes critical thinking a powerful and practical tool in business. Your kids might even be impressed. «

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