

Five Ways to Improve Your Critical Thinking

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Are you a critical thinker? To a degree, this is a trick question – it requires critical thinking to answer it! Even the most introspective of us is not 100% honest with ourselves. What would your coworkers and boss say? The brutal truth is, if we're the only ones who think we're critical thinkers, chances are we're not. Since critical thinking is a skill, it can be cultivated and enhanced. If you love attentiveness to detail, chances are you already possess the analytical and creative traits that are fundamental to demonstrating critical thinking abilities.

What exactly is critical thinking? It means being able to develop strategic ideas, evaluate others' ideas, and maintain professional skepticism. It does not mean condemnatory fault-finding missions or analyzing the faults and merits of a person, situation or organization.

Ways to Increase Critical Thinking Ability

Critical thinkers aren't born – they are a result of consistently performing the following five activities:

1. *Recognizing when you are making an assumption.* Some things to do: be able to support opinions and conclusions with demonstrable facts. State your position by breaking the problem down into its components including root cause. When you perceive an error in logic, respond appropriately by being disciplined and tenacious in following a line of thought and questioning.
2. *Demonstrating professional skepticism,* especially when evaluating data and formulating conclusions. Question the source, completeness, accuracy and timing of available data. Use PNI thinking to review and evaluate ideas before making decisions. Ask yourself:
 - What are the **Positives** about the idea? Identify an aspect or perspective that is beneficial or good.
 - What are the **Negatives**? Identify an aspect or perspective that needs development or improvement.
 - What is **Interesting** about the idea? Identify an aspect or perspective that strikes you as appealing or different. Probe these areas and gather more information. Innovation stems from this exploratory approach.

Critical thinkers are crucial in business: they develop strategic ideas, evaluate others' ideas, and maintain professional skepticism

3. *Watching your language.* Be alert to the use of words like "always", "never", "some" and "most". These words overgeneralize the situation and create a defeatist setting for the conversation. A good rule of thumb is to watch out for oversimplification - things are rarely that

simple. Also, be wary of complexities because they can detract from the goal - things are rarely that complicated.

4. *Watching your language: again.* Be alert to the use of the passive voice (which can camouflage or omit facts) versus the active voice. Passive sentences are more verbose and non-directive than active ones, and do not convey any sense of urgency. Your message needs to convey decisiveness, direction, and certainty. Do not use qualifying or conditional phrases like “seems to” or words like “minor” (unless there are major issues as well). State the facts and quantify whenever possible.
5. *Differentiating fact from perception.* Is it really or does it just seem to be? If multiple variables aren’t measured independently, the conclusions are susceptible to the Halo Effect. First identified by US psychologist Edward Thorndike in 1920, the Halo Effect is the tendency to make specific inferences on the basis of a general impression. If a company is doing well, with rising sales, high profits, and a sharply increasing stock price, the tendency is to infer that the company has a sound strategy, a visionary leader, etc. Performance, good or bad, creates an overall impression—a halo—that shapes how we perceive its strategy, leaders, employees, culture, and other elements.

For example, if an area had clean audits in the past, there’s a tendency to expect it to continue to have clean audits as well as a tendency to expect low or acceptable residual risk (a halo). If the data are full of halos, it doesn’t matter how much we’ve gathered or how sophisticated our analysis appears to be. Performance is relative, not absolute. An organization can get better and fall further behind at the same time. The link between inputs and outcomes is tenuous. Bad outcomes don’t always mean that managers made mistakes; and good outcomes don’t always mean they acted brilliantly. Make sure you understand the critical linkage among the business objectives, business activities, risks, and controls. This will ground your approach in specifics.

Are you a critical thinker? Those of us who are, have dedicated time and conscientious effort to becoming one. By practicing the five tips outlined above, you will be well on your way to enhancing your ability to think critically on a consistent basis.



TWPP Training programs that improve critical thinking ability:

- **Critical Thinking Techniques**
- **Root Cause Analysis Techniques**
- **Data Collection Interviewing**
- **Process Analysis and Mapping**
- **Techniques for Risk Assessment and Control Evaluation**

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