

What's Critical About Critical Thinking?

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Have you ever noticed when people say "I'll think about it," they hardly ever do? Think about it. How much thought, how much dedicated, concentrated, mindful brain engagement goes into the decisions we make? Most of us would be offended were someone to stereotype us as sheep, bleating away while we follow the flock wherever it grazes. "We have minds!" I hear someone aver, "We're not just followers of the status quo!" I'd like to believe that. But aren't we?

"To use the mind to consider ideas and make judgments, to focus attention on and to believe something or have something as an opinion" are some of the ways *Encarta Dictionary* defines the word *think*. Thinking in the true sense of the word is work. The seemingly effortless motions we go through is what academia refers to as linear thinking.

Each of us has a storehouse of knowledge, based by and large on personal history, which we then compartmentalize into heuristics or rules of thumb. These heuristics are what we subconsciously call on when we make choices on the spot. They are cognitive biases, formed by experiential learning. If A, then B. Always. Linear thinking is the norm, and as protocol, it permeates the world around us - government policies, laws, corporate America and everything else from health care to waste management, education to public service. And yes, it works. Life as we know it continues fairly consistently day after day.

But at what cost? What if we were to take into consideration additional information and viewpoints? What if, instead of simply falling back on "this is the way it's always been done" or an "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" mentality, we took a moment and engaged our minds?

Non-linear thinking makes that requirement. More than thinking outside the box, it involves the recognition of other viewpoints and the determination of other possible outcomes. It looks at A, acknowledges B and then evaluates C, D and E to determine if F would be as effective or perhaps more so than B. Some consider it creative. I see it simply as part of the true thought process.

Thinking is something we as a society have seemingly gotten away from. We are shocked and surprised when the "unthinkable" happens. The horror of 9-11 rocked the nation, and understandably so. Words are not sufficient to encompass the tragedy, grief and emotion we continue to endure due to the events of that day. Personally, I like the fact that on Monday, Sept. 10, such horror was not on your or my or our friend's or neighbor's radar screen. However, that officials at the FBI or CIA or NORAD or Homeland Security didn't

think critically about the intelligence data they did indeed have pertaining to what was to happen the following day is, well, unthinkable. And unforgivable.

Critical thinking. Problem solving. The ability to make thoughtful decisions. In the education sector, these are known as 21st century skills and they now are required to be taught in K-12 classrooms. There is no denying that students of all ages need to know how to employ all three. It begs the question, though: Why were these practices deemed “unnecessary” in the 20th century?

Like him or not, it's hard to refute Dr. Phil's favorite response to the person who remains in what most of us see as an exercise in futility, “And how's that working for you?” Obviously it's not. And yet what Dr. Phil is trying to do is to get that person to begin to truly think - to dissect the situation, look objectively at the pieces and make a decision based on fact, not emotion. This is the basis of critical thinking.

Who of us, however, hasn't known someone in a Dr. Phil scenario who has gone through the steps, acknowledged the best decision, but remains mired in the situation? Willingness to change is the critical ingredient in critical thinking. It requires an open mind to consider new information and to analyze data that seems contrary to your present knowledge base. It takes self-surety to weigh the results and decide whether they are valid and convincing enough to make you change your view. Granted, there will be times when, after all this work, your original view or decision will be strengthened instead of swayed. What's important is that you went through the process.

Asking the Right Questions (Browne and Keeley, 2006) provides criteria with which virtually any information (situation, problem, idea) can be evaluated. What issues are presented? What conclusions are you expected to buy, and what reasons are given to lead you to that purchase? Considering these questions and your answers to them is just the beginning of the process. [I will even go so far to suggest that if we were to employ just these basics, many of our decisions would be different.]

Take for instance, a televised campaign ad. When you ponder the issue(s) presented, do you consider the flipside or the issues not presented? What conclusions other than those suggested might also be possible? Is the conclusion given the only result of the provided reasoning? Is that reasoning sound, ambiguous or wrought with fallacy? Is the suggested evidence conclusive or merely leading? What other reasons could be considered or conclusions reached?

Determining assumptions is another effective exercise in the critical thinking process. Back to the campaign ad example, what biases does the provided information contain? What values does the candidate assume you share? Is the source credible? Do you even know what the source is? To embark on such analysis is to begin to think critically.

I know what you're thinking. *Who has the time to do all of this?* Thinking critically is like learning to play tennis. Just as it takes time and much effort to

perfect your serve, so it is with mastering the analysis process. With practice, you'll find yourself focusing less on the mechanics and more on the game. It becomes second nature as you continue to play.

Critical thinking takes work, and therein lies the rub. It boils down to change, which most people resist, and our willingness to embrace it, which most people aren't eager to do. Our heuristics and biases will always remain in the back of our minds. Sometimes "if A, then B" will indeed be the best choice. But when analysis of new information proves that data not only worthy of consideration but also valid, we must be willing to adopt a new opinion, rewrite that particular rule of thumb and make a different decision.

Otherwise, we will be like sheep. As a friend of mine likes to say, "Whose fuzzy bottom are you following?"