

## Leading Ways: IMPROVING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

One of the most challenging skills to teach is critical thinking. But it is a common observation when I work with supervisors as to why they do not delegate more. Mentors often see the lack of critical thinking skills as a common career limiting deficit, and coaches frequently identify poor critical thinking skills as the source of other leadership problems that beset the people they work with. Even if the senior supervisor, mentor or coach has great critical thinking skills themselves, the knowledge is often more difficult to make as a clear and objective pathway for improvement.

But the development of critical thinking skills can be made more transparent by establishing a definitive set of questions to structure an analysis of the situation and choice of a next action. The steps below offer a good way to develop these skills in those around you and perhaps even useful for your own critical thinking development too.

- 1. State the general purpose** of the work as clearly as you can before you - answer the questions, do the task or complete the project. Why am I doing this? What am I trying to achieve? Purposeful action has always been essential to leadership. We think in terms of causal links toward those aims, but being clear about the target helps deliver the arrow.
- 2.** To achieve this purpose, it is essential to have a **more immediate goal** which can guide behavior and action. Has the goal been clearly stated and understood by all relevant parties? Does it make sense that this goal will lead to achieving the stated purpose? Are there competing goals that offer an alternative path to the purpose? What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of each of the different pathways to the purpose?
- 3.** Once a goal is selected, list the **linear steps** to get the work done. What needs to be done technically to achieve this goal? This is a pretty straightforward undertaking that should not be over-thought. If you want to achieve something short or long term, what are the steps that will be needed to achieve this result?
- 4.** Put the question, task, or project into a **broader context** or framework. There are many choices for these frameworks. Strategic, academic, personal, or a methodological process all offer different frames for evaluating a course of action. Each has a distinctive set of values, rules, returns and risks. As it turns out there are multiple ways to understand, value and act on something. Partly this is an ordering of aims. Am I doing something as an end in and of itself or am I doing it instrumentally to achieve a higher or more valued goal? The context is also a vehicle for communication to others about the work and their role in it.
- 5.** Assess the **reasonableness** of the aim, goal, process and their fit to the broader context. This is the heavy lifting of critical thinking and the work involves several important steps. First an awareness of the first four questions (aim, goals, steps and context) through proper

observation and attention. Next, an evaluation in the logic of these. Do they fit together? Will the steps lead to the goal? Does the aim achieve what we desire? What evidence have we or others offered to support these four questions? What is the value of this information? Is it more fact or opinion? Have we chosen the most valuable context in which to place them? Just to name a few of the most important considerations. Finally does this fit from top to bottom in a consistent and systematic fashion? Sometimes this step involves a “sniff” test, the formal logic is there, but something seems a bit off. It is a form of reasonableness, but it is a balancing of our purely rational thinking with intuitive judgment.

6. Speculate about the **political context** of the work you are doing. Imagine this from the perspective of others and how they will see and value this undertaking. This involves empathy, the capacity to place yourself into another’s shoes, with understanding and acceptance. The easiest of all questions to ask of this is “how would I feel or react if I was on the receiving end of this?” The more you can suppress your bias and prejudice when answering this will increase the value of what you get from this process. We usually think of empathy as being directed toward another individual. When its object is another organization or part of an organization, we call it situational awareness, but it is the same process. However, this may take some inquiry and investigation to know what the other group values, fears, aspires to and what they think of us past, present and future.
7. Humans have a capacity to **think backward and forward in time** and this capacity can be used to improve your critical skills. This is how we put all of the insight in the items above into a useful array of thought and action. It goes something like this:
  - a. Where am I going with this work (proxy here for question, task project)?
  - b. What steps will I need to take to get there?
  - c. Why is this valuable, past and present?
  - d. Is all of this reasonable?
  - e. If I take these steps, who will be happy and who will be annoyed?Given the answers to these, what do I need to know to understand what is needed next? Is it more information or am I ready for an action?
8. **Check your biases.** First try to see what filters you bring to understanding the work. For instance, you may be very familiar with this type of work and have done it many times before. If that is the case, you may not be open to recognizing the potential value of the perspectives of others. Or you may have a preset bias about the value of the contributions of a certain type of people determined by their training, status, age, gender, or other irrelevant characteristics. This unconscious bias will lead to not valuing their contributions. Try to recognize which filters you have, and we all have them. Second, check the biases at the door. Don’t let them cloud your thinking. Finally, as most if not all bias is unconscious, the best way to improve critical thinking is not by our will, but by structures, such as, outside review, second opinions, obligations to include certain information, that can force a reduction in bias.

These suggestions can be used to improve your critical thinking skills or the skills of those that you supervise, mentor or coach. The first step is awareness of how you think about a work project. It is helpful to keep a journal and frame the work described above in one place. Asking someone you supervise to do the same can help them enhance their skills. Review their process with them and make suggestions about ways to expand their thinking.