Most people believe critical thinking is a task only for those in leadership positions. In reality, it’s a task that most of us should be engaged in for most activities. Critical thinking, according to Brookfield and Knox (1987), means calling into question the very assumptions underlying customary, habitual ways of thinking and acting, and then being ready to think and act differently on the basis of this critical questioning. Regardless of one’s circumstances or position in life, critical thinking is important in making informed decisions.

Critical thinking can help individuals avoid common errors associated with “groupthink” when working in teams. Groupthink can distort thinking to the point that people make irrational, ill-advised decisions. Unless people are thinking critically during the decision-making process, alternatives and procedures can be missed.

Why think “critically”? Critical thinking ensures that all alternatives will be considered so that the best decisions can be made. Critical thinking also helps in validating norms within a culture and supports the development of creative solutions for life decisions.

How does it happen? Those who engage in problem solving are half-way through the process of critical thinking. Once the problem has been identified, attention can be given to what the root cause is and how the problem should be solved. That involves several skills, including:

- **Effective listening**: keeping an open mind while listening for ideas and facts
- **Self-regulation**: governance with decision-making and thought processes
- **Critical questioning**: reflecting on information and eliciting underlying assumptions
- **Analysis**: relating the situation to events, people, resources
- **Evaluation**: determining what is feasible and how well it works

These skills help define the root cause of the problem, the possible solutions, the solutions most likely to be effective, and how to avoid the problem in the future. Going through this process calls into question a lot of habitual behaviors, long-standing beliefs, and attitudes that support decisions. Critical thinking is not an easy task, but one well worth doing.

Some people are intimidated by the idea of “critical thinking” because they feel uncomfortable
volunteering thoughts contrary to what the group believes. As a leader, you can support change and show respect for others by your actions and words. This will create an environment that fosters critical thinking and the solutions that result from it. Encourage others in your work group to “think outside the box.”

Emotions are tied to most everything we do, so it is natural that emotions are involved in critical thinking. Sometimes these emotions drive the questions that find the best solutions for all involved. Emotions are also tied to the values and beliefs that underlie most of the habitual behavior we exhibit. If you challenge this behavior, you challenge people’s beliefs and must be prepared to deal with this.

Success in critical thinking begins with a desire to change on the part of the organization and the individuals involved. Be willing to accept the pleasant and the unpleasant. By doing so, you open the door to make others feel welcomed and gain experience as well as information. That information can assist you in many ways and becomes another essential element in the process. Resolutions to problems come from the information that you seek out. It is easier to get to the root cause of problems if you gather information. By scrutinizing your behavior and that of organizations, you can learn a lot that can help you resolve problems. Do not be afraid to try new things. If nothing else becomes habit, that should.

References