Critical Thinking
By Danielle A. Harris

Most believe critical thinking to be a task left to those in leadership. 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 circumstances or positions in life, critical thinking should become an
integral part of adult life so that informed decisions can be made.

Critical thinking offers opportunities for individuals to avoid making common errors of groupthink
when working in teams. Groupthink distorts thinking to the point of members making irrational
decisions and ill-advised decisions. During the decision-making process alternatives and
procedures can be missed.

Why think “critically”? As an important part in adult life, it allows for all alternatives to be
considered to best meet the needs of the individual and of the situation. Critical thinking also
assists in validating norms within a culture and supports the development of creative solutions for
life decisions.

How does it happen? Those who indulge in problem solving are half-way through the process of
critical thinking. Where do the two intersect? Once the problem has been identified, then comes
time to consider what the root cause is and how it 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 process
- Critical questioning: allows for reflection & eliciting underlying assumptions
- Analysis: relate events, people, resources
- Evaluation: determining what is feasible and how well it works

These skills lead to defining the root cause of the problem, what possible solutions exist, which
solutions best meet the needs of the problem and finally how to improve the situation to avoid this
problem the next time. 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.

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Involves Affirmation. Due to the nature of “critical thinking,” many are intimidated because they
feel uncomfortable volunteering thoughts contrary to what the group believes. By supporting
change and showing respect for others with actions and words, an environment is then open for
critical thinking and the solutions that result from it. Encourage others in your work group to “think
outside the box.”

Based in emotion. Emotions are tied to most everything we do, so it is natural that emotions are
present in the process of “critical thinking.” Sometimes these emotions drive the questions that
find the best solutions for all involved. These emotions are also tied to the values and beliefs that
underlie most of the habitual behavior that we exhibit. If you challenge this behavior, you
challenge those beliefs; thus be prepared to deal with them.

Success in Critical Thinking. Success in critical thinking begins with a desire to change by 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 to 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. Additionally, 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:
