

Critical Thinking for Managers: A Manifesto



by Crystal King

Learning without thinking is labor lost;
thinking without learning is dangerous.
— Chinese Proverb

INTRODUCTION

Smart companies around the globe are dependent upon active critical thinkers in order to develop, produce and disseminate their goods and services. Managers in a position of creating change within their organizations need to learn, exhibit and teach critical thinking skills to their colleagues and employees. Why? Because making decisions in today's world—a world of increasing pressure, uncertainty, conflicting ideas and opinions create challenges that managers need to adeptly navigate. Understanding key methods of critical thinking helps managers learn to address the right problems, identify risks and make better decisions.

THE MANIFESTO

For managers, the development of positive thinking dispositions⁴ is key.

What are thinking dispositions? They are the tendencies that a person has toward thinking and the way in which they behave as a result of that thinking. Being an effective manager means being a good thinker. But what exactly does that entail? According to Shari Tishman, one of the investigators at the educational research think tank at Harvard's Project Zero, good thinking is a combination of both critical and creative thinking skills, values, habits and motivations, all of which help to determine whether or not good thinking skills are employed

when they are really needed. The important thing is that thinking dispositions can be taught and learned. There are several key thinking dispositions that are important for good thinkers. Managers should take note and determine ways to best use them to their advantage in critical situations.

A. BE CURIOUS AND QUESTIONING.

Learn to look beyond the surface. When someone hands you a report do you take it at face value or do you ask for clarification or additional information? Thoughtfully question your own judgements and the judgements of the people that work for you. Do you have all the information you need to form a strong decision?

Listen to the ideas your employees and colleagues have and ask questions to determine how they can help to further the company, your work and the work of your team.

Take interest! Pay attention to news of your company's products and direction, even if they don't necessarily apply to your immediate job. Be aware of industry news and happenings. Ask questions about how to apply this knowledge to the work at hand.

B. THINK BROADLY AND ADVENTUROUSLY.

This goes hand-in-hand with being curious and questioning. Your curiosity and thirst for knowledge should give you the ability to see the bigger picture. When you are aware of the world outside your immediate scope of work, you automatically broaden your ideas about the work at hand. Step outside your comfort zone and be open to people and situations that you may have brushed aside in the past. Don't be afraid to take mental risks—propose new ideas, embark upon possibilities. The idea of dreaming big applies here.

C. REASON CLEARLY AND CAREFULLY.

Asking questions helps to give you enough information to make rational decisions. Learn how to weigh your options. Take time to think through various scenarios before you make decisions that could be crucial. What is the worst that could happen? What is the best that can happen? Who will be affected? Why would you want to move forward on each of the various paths that are presented to you? What are the benefits? What are the detriments? Take advantage of simple tools such as a pro and con list. Take a big piece of paper, split it down the middle with a line and write on each side the pros and cons of your actions—it will help you see the big picture. Analyze your list carefully. If there are five pros and two cons, are they equal in weight? Are those two cons significant enough to outweigh the five pros? Sometimes this can be the case—again, ask questions to understand all your options.

D. ORGANIZE ONE'S OWN THINKING.

Too many managers blunder through their jobs, their lives and their interactions with colleagues and employees without any rhyme or reason. Taking time to organize your thinking will go a long way toward helping you be more productive and efficient while at the same time, improving your overall relationships with the people with whom you are in daily contact. This can take different forms for different people. For some, journaling one's thoughts, actions, hopes and dreams can be beneficial. Notetaking, to-do lists, personal digital assistants (PDA) and specialized desktop software can all be mechanisms for organizing thinking. David Allen's wildly popular book *Getting Things Done* describes a detailed method of organizing one's work—which works in tandem with organizing thought. Regardless of what method you choose, find a way to organize your thought processes and you will find yourself one step closer to better organization in your life and in turn, peace of mind.

E. GIVE TIME TO THINKING.

Indulge yourself in activities that require the use of your brainpower. Your brain is a muscle and exercising it is key to self-growth, continuing health and well-being. Look for and create time for activities that will help you learn and move further toward success. For example: Don't have time to read all those magazines that pile up on your desk? At the beginning of the week, pick two that have particular relevance, scan the table of contents and choose two to three articles that you can peruse over lunch, on the subway or at any other time of your choosing. Toss the rest. You'll find this to be more efficient; plus, you'll eliminate the guilt of not having time for weekly reading and you'll be more in the loop than had you piled the magazines up and then tossed them at the end of the month in a fit of overwhelm. By doing this, you have actively chosen and given time to thinking.

This also applies to finding time to enable yourself to apply some of the previously outlined thinking dispositions. Instead of making a quick decision, take time to ask questions and look at the big picture so that you can make a clear and reasoned decision. Determine the urgency and if you can, take a day and think about the possible outcomes before giving your response. Sometimes a day might not be feasible—it could be an hour. What else can you do to give yourself the time to think rationally? Take a walk. It could be just up and down the backstairs in your building or around the perimeter of the parking lot. Pull yourself out of the situation and permit yourself time to think. Many of the greatest thinkers of our time were fond of walking—precisely because of the power of thought that can arise when taking time to physically move and interact with the environment.

It also doesn't hurt to exercise your brain more directly, with brain-teasers, logic games and word exercises. Just like all muscles, if you don't use it, you will lose it! Take a few minutes each day or week to challenge yourself with a crossword puzzle, Sudoku game or other brain-teaser (you can find a bunch at <http://www.braingle.com/>). Brain-teasers help you ex-

ercise your creativity, sharpen your problem-solving skills and expand your ability to reason with logic.

F. POSE AND EXPLORE PROBLEMS.

Too many managers gloss over problems that come their way. Rather than looking at problems as a challenge to overcome, they see them as hindrance or nuisance that they would rather not deal with. Rather than ignoring problems, a strong manager looks at all aspects of projects and opportunities to determine what situations may arise when moving forward. Thus the manager can learn to anticipate what might pop up, review the problem early on and explore options to tackle the problem if it does in fact arise. This doesn't mean being a naysayer when someone proposes an idea that you see might have holes. Instead, pose the problem and invite assistance in exploring the ways that it can be sidestepped or overcome.

G. SEEK MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES.

Go beyond the facts, look for evidence and do further inquiry. Never assume that what is in front of you is the only information, the only answer or the only application. Additionally, two heads are often better than one and, in many cases, even more can be better than two heads. Managers with good thinking aren't afraid to ask for different opinions. They don't assume that their way is always best and they will openly seek multiple perspectives in order to determine the best course of action.

H. BE JUDICIOUS AND REFLECTIVE.

Being fair-minded is one of the most important traits a manager can cultivate. Take time to determine if you are playing favorites or if you have a bias that may be getting in the way of your decisions. Look for ways to give opportunity to each of your employees and to share your time and energy in the most fair-minded way possible.

Reflect upon your actions. If the old adage is true and history always repeats itself, it behoves you to have an understanding of your choices in order to know if you should take a similar action in the future or if you should choose differently.

Actively cultivate these thinking dispositions among your colleagues and employees.

This statement means more than just leading by example. While that is important, it is also important that you talk with your co-workers and explain how good thinking in the workplace will build morale, bolster production and efficiency and help the company to be flexible, fast and innovative. Look for opportunities to advise employees on ways to incorporate these thinking dispositions. Ask questions and explain why you are asking them. Look for holes in projects and explain your motivations in needing to look at the bigger picture and exploring all possibilities. After a big project is complete, conduct a “sunset” session as some companies call them—review the project; what went well, what didn’t and what could be improved upon next time. Share your methods when it comes to organizing your thoughts. When strong managers help their employees cultivate good thinking dispositions, they help their employees become more productive, creative and motivated.

Create a safe environment where employees feel that their opinions, ideas and the work that they generate is valued. Encourage employees to reflect on their work and behavior, encourage individual accountability and expect people to make decisions at their own level. Help them to decide on and explore problems of their own choosing.

Asking questions can be threatening. Nearly everyone can remember a time when a tough boss began asking questions to which they did not have the answers—or when the questions were asked in such a way as to threaten, prove the person wrong or assert control. Think about the manner in which you are asking for information. Forcing employees into submission isn't a result of good thinking but rather a result of fear and anxiety on the part of the manager. Instead, learn how to be a mentor, or at least a manager that commands respect for good reasons such as for wanting to understand, help and encourage. Let your co-workers and employees give their opinions without interrupting and then state your intentions clearly before you travel down a line of questioning. Ask questions that foster collaborative thinking. For example: "The Microsoft project didn't work out the way we expected. What do you think went wrong? The deadline slipped and no one was notified. Is there a way that we can prevent this from happening in the future?" Asking questions in a calm, patient manner and encouraging dialogue helps to not only foster communication but it can also draw out new problem-solving possibilities while, simultaneously, enabling the speaker to feel valued and motivated to do better, even when potentially under fire.

Keep an open-door policy. Invite your colleagues and co-workers to share their thoughts and ideas. Remember, there are no dumb questions or stupid ideas. By cultivating the above thinking dispositions, sometimes the blandest suggestion can turn into the most brilliant idea. Asking questions is the way that we learn and part of being a good manager is being a good teacher whom is able to ask the right questions while inviting questions from others. If you don't know the answer, take the time to find out and report back.

Be interested and help your employees to be interested. Discover what makes them tick and help them find ways to engage their passions. For example, if you find that writing is something that one of your engineers really enjoys, find ways for them to write byline articles on their area of expertise for the PR group to leverage. If you learn that one of your team members is interested in becoming a project manager but is lacking some of the skills, help them

embark upon a path that will help them better their skills. Help your employees set their own deadlines and stick to them. Encourage them to engage in organizing their own thoughts and actions. In short, go back to #2, wash, rinse and repeat.

Consistently engage in metacognition—thinking about your thinking and related actions.

This sounds so simple but it is surprising how many people don't practice metacognition. It's one of the most important skills any person can have and is essential for good managers. Thinking about your own thinking helps you to understand your motivations, biases, mistakes, desires and can help you be strategic about moving forward in all parts of your life, personal and professional. To do this:

- Ⓐ Reflect upon your actions, thoughts and plans, both task-oriented and strategic.
- Ⓑ Practice constant evaluation of projects and goals.
- Ⓒ Be ready to change based upon new input and reflection from colleagues and your own employees.
- Ⓓ Learn from your mistakes and your triumphs.
- Ⓔ Recognize your emotions and their effects on the thoughts and actions—both of yourself and others.

Set standards by which to measure results. This helps bring focus, formulate plans and set goals.

Do you have standards for your work? Do you have a mission and values that can help you to set overarching goals? This is important for your company, team, and professional and personal lives. For years, author Stephen R. Covey has helped readers determine their mission, values and, in turn, their goals. Doing so creates a foundation that helps to give plans legs

upon which to stand. The Franklin Covey site has an excellent mission statement formulator (<http://www.franklincovey.com/missionbuilder/index.html>) designed to “add focus, direction, and a sense of purpose to your daily decisions.” Defining a mission for yourself, your department, team, and/or project helps define the common goal, the direction in which you are headed, and the purpose of the goal. Values help to determine how you accomplish that work.

Always look for opportunities of transfer—the ability to take existing knowledge and strategies and apply them from one context to another. Identify connections and reusable components.

Sometimes the best ideas aren’t new ones but ones that have been reshaped or built upon. Writers do this all the time, taking the framework and then changing it all around. For example, when writing press releases, collateral or other documents, search for other companies that might have similar types of information—regardless of the industry—take the framework and rewrite (this is not advocating plagiarism but rather taking components and shaping them to be your own). Talk to colleagues in other departments or companies and find out what they have done to solve an innovative problem—be it a messy filing system, a coding problem or a morale issue. Read up on ways that managers of other companies have solved problems, again, regardless of the industry.

Actively seek interaction with other departments and members of your organization in order to gain new insights, ideas and critical feedback.

In addition to discovering new means of transfer, talk to your colleagues about what they think is and is not working. Find out what their ideas are and look for ways to help promote their good thinking. If you can, be direct and ask for even more critical feedback—on how you can do your own work better. If you don’t ask, you may never know or understand if there are problems in your department, employees or projects—until it’s too late.

Encourage both positive and negative feedback from colleagues and employees on your plans and actions. Seek to understand and incorporate their point of view. They have personal, practical knowledge that may prove invaluable.

How many meetings have you been in that have turned into a whine and complain session? When everyone is ranting and raving about what is wrong it is sometimes difficult to come up with ideas to turn it all around. On the flip side, what about projects where you don't hear about the negative until the company is so deep in that it is difficult to change gears or to pull out of the situation (Boston's Big Dig fiasco and leaking tunnels comes to mind)? At all stages, good thinking managers should work to discover both the pluses and minuses of a given situation. Only when everything is on the table can a sound logical decision be made. Good thinking managers shouldn't be worrying about pandering to the higher ups more than they listen to the people in the trenches. Pay attention to what your employees think about your work and the work of the team. Find out what is good and bad and then look for a plan of action.

Understanding is often acquired through practice. Sometimes lots of practice.

Encourage collaborative thinking and multiple sources of input for yourself and your employees. Engage in brainstorming activities, team projects and involve yourself in committees.

Scientist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Linus Pauling once said, "The best way to get a good idea is to get a lot of ideas." He was right. And the best way to come up with multiple ideas is to work with your colleagues in a group setting. There is research to back up the fact that the active exchange of ideas within small groups not only increases interest among the participants but also promotes critical thinking.^B So by engaging in brainstorming activities, you are generating a multitude of ideas that may lead to innovative results and helping to build

team spirit and foster morale. One of the best books on working collaboratively is by James Higgins—*101 Creative Problem Solving Techniques, The New Handbook for Business*.

Provide opportunities for your employees to contribute and have influence in new projects and in other areas of the organization.

Too many managers tend to keep their employees close to the vest, which limits their growth potential and the potential of the team as a whole. Instead, encourage ways to crosstrain your employees. Help them to meet others in the organization and encourage them to give input in projects where their skills will be valued. This builds morale and also encourages new ways of idea transfer and collaborative thinking. Plus, if your excellent employees are seen in a positive light in the organization, it shines directly back on you as their manager.

Emphasize facilitative questioning for yourself and your employees. Take a step back from your own agenda. Listen carefully and work to genuinely understand what the other person is experiencing. This will help you look closer at beliefs, values and assumptions that may underlie and drive behavior. Paraphrase and reflect ideas back for the best understanding.

Listening is a skill that too few people work to cultivate. When you don't really "hear" someone, your actions quickly betray you. Your employees lose confidence in their position on the team or worse, your superiors may find your results short-sighted and your team mismanaged. It behoves you to pay attention, ask questions to insure that you have adequately understood and make an honest effort to try and see things as though you were standing in another's shoes.

The International Listening Association (www.listen.org) points out the following common listening problems that good thinking managers would do their best to avoid:

Effective listeners do their best to avoid these habits^C:

- Ⓐ Calling the subject uninteresting
- Ⓑ Criticizing the speaker &/or delivery
- Ⓒ Getting over-stimulated
- Ⓓ Listening only for facts (bottom line)
- Ⓔ Not taking notes or outlining everything
- Ⓕ Faking attention
- Ⓖ Tolerating or creating distractions
- Ⓗ Tuning out difficult material
- Ⓘ Letting emotional words block the message
- ⓵ Wasting the time difference between speed of speech and speed of thought

Do you ever find yourself falling into any of these habits? ^D

- Ⓐ Interrupting the speaker.
- Ⓑ Not looking at the speaker.
- Ⓒ Rushing the speaker and making him feel that he's wasting the listener's time.
- Ⓓ Showing interest in something other than the conversation.
- Ⓔ Getting ahead of the speaker and finishing her thoughts.
- Ⓕ Not responding to the speaker's requests.

- Ⓒ Saying, “Yes, but ...” as if the listener has made up his mind.
- Ⓓ Topping the speaker’s story with “That reminds me ...” or “That’s nothing, let me tell you about ... ”
- Ⓔ Forgetting what was talked about previously.
- Ⓕ Asking too many questions about details.

If so, make a conscious effort to begin turning these bad habits around.

Understand that there are a variety of thinking styles and multiple intelligences and that each individual you come in contact with may have strengths and weaknesses in different areas. Understanding the variants will help with metacognition while fostering better relationships with colleagues and employees.

Not everyone thinks, acts or produces results in the same way. As a manager you will work with many different types of people, most of whom won’t be anything like you. This is an important thing for good thinking managers to realize and learn more about—if you assume that people should think and act like you do, you’ll end up handling critical projects and situations poorly because you weren’t able to read and interact with people on the appropriate levels.

Some of the most popular theories about thinking styles are that of Robert Sternberg, Howard Gardner and Daniel Goleman. Each of these researchers has identified different ways that people think and behave. Understanding these differences and learning how your colleagues and employees fit into these categories will help you make better decisions, build morale and be more flexible and efficient on your projects.

Robert Sternberg identified three types of [Successful Intelligence^E](#). The theory is that the interactive nature of these intelligences is necessary for problem solving, decision making

and creative ideation. Each person has some level of these three intelligences but, typically, people tend lean more towards one.

- Ⓐ Analytical (compare, analyze, judge, evaluate)
- Ⓑ Creative (invent, imagine, suppose, design)
- Ⓒ Practical (practice, implement, show and use)

This would explain why some people tend to excel more in particular areas than in others. Fiction writers, for example, may not be great with their hands or might have a terrible time analyzing numbers.

Howard Gardner theorizes that there are different [Multiple Intelligences^F](#) that different people exhibit. An individual may be adept in several areas but it is rare for anyone to exhibit high intelligence across the board.

- Ⓐ Linguistic intelligence (as in a poet)
- Ⓑ Logical–mathematical intelligence (as in a scientist);
- Ⓒ Musical intelligence (as in a composer);
- Ⓓ Spatial intelligence (as in a sculptor or airplane pilot);
- Ⓔ Bodily kinesthetic intelligence (as in an athlete or dancer);
- Ⓕ Interpersonal intelligence (as in a salesman or teacher);
- Ⓖ Intrapersonal intelligence (exhibited by individuals with accurate views of themselves)

Some have even proposed another level of intelligence—that of cooking/food. Those of us who know someone with a particular natural talent and understanding of food and wine can understand how this intelligence may, in fact, exist.

An understanding of multiple intelligences is critical for good thinking managers. Knowing that someone has a strong linguistic intelligence may explain why they aren't entirely happy in finance; perhaps they would be more efficient in a role where they are writing reports or using their skills more appropriately. Someone who is weak in intrapersonal intelligence may have no clue that people see them as rude, arrogant or incompetent. They don't know how to adjust because they just aren't that self-aware. Knowing that people think differently and behave in certain ways as a result of their primary areas of intelligence gives good thinking managers a leg up on understanding and running their teams.

Daniel Goleman is well known for his books on emotional intelligence. In his best seller, *Emotional Intelligence*, he identifies [Five Emotional Competencies](#):⁶

- ① To identify and name one's emotional states and to understand the link between emotions, thought and action
- ② To manage one's emotional states — to control emotions or to shift undesirable emotional states to more adequate ones
- ③ To enter into emotional states associated with a drive to achieve and be successful
- ④ To read, be sensitive to and influence other people's emotions
- ⑤ To enter and sustain satisfactory interpersonal relationships

Good thinking managers will work toward mastering all five of those competencies and will actively take a role in helping their employees improve as well. Understanding that an employee, manager or colleague may not have strong emotional intelligence can help you

reassess your actions when dealing with that person. Some people never make it past #2—I'm sure we can all think of one or two people who have no clue how to handle and understand their emotions. What can you do as a manager to help your employees move past that stage and toward better thinking and higher productivity?

Be aware that cultural differences can affect how people think critically and solve problems.

Cultural differences can be a big challenge for someone who has not been exposed to a wide variety of people with different preferences, religions, habits, skin color, language, etc. Even the smallest thing can be misinterpreted—the idea of personal space, for example. Some cultures don't understand that in America you need to leave several inches of space between you and the person to whom you are speaking. Americans may find it offensive or misunderstand when someone is standing nearly on top of them in a conversation. This type of misunderstanding could leave the manager angry/uncomfortable at the employee or vice versa. Take time to ask questions (be thoughtful and non-judgmental when you ask—explain that you want to understand where they are coming from). Read up on the various differences in cultures. An excellent book on understanding cultural differences in business is *Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands: How to Do Business In Sixty Countries* by Terry Morrison, Wayne Conaway and George Borden. The book explains various behavior styles, reasons for dressing in a certain way, protocol in meetings, etc. Even if you don't travel, the book is a great way to understand certain customs and habits of various cultures that you will certainly encounter in any line of business or in life in general.

Cultivate a positive and determined attitude toward your life and work. Demonstrate persistence in the face of failure and confidence despite uncertainty.

The most successful people in any organization display a positive attitude toward the people they meet and the situations in which they work. They don't complain unless they have a solution. They don't gossip, put people down and they don't naysay projects, mergers, the

company, etc. Negativity begets negativity and you will push people away if you have a downer way of looking at life. Look at problems as challenges. Decide to face them head on and look for creative angles to overcome setbacks. Taking a positive tact toward your work will not only raise opinions of you in the eyes of others but it will help you be more creative and affirmative in your everyday actions.

And finally—Outlaw the idea of “I can’t.”

Because good thinking managers realize that there is always a way to solve any and every problem.

ENDNOTES

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
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