

Critical Thinking: The PRESENCE of Mind

To facilitate the development of critical thinking skills and to infuse critical thinking strategies into to what we do, the PRESENCE of Mind approach was developed. This self-guided, self-disciplined thinking approach facilitates the trained and practiced application of rigor to our thought processes to ensure we are using the best thinking we are capable of in any situation.

Critical thinking is an applied skill. As such, it is something one learns through application. The more you practice, the more proficient you will become. The benefit you receive from critical thinking is directly proportionate to the effort you put into it.

PRESENCE of Mind Approach

Each of these components is part of an iterative process of applying critical thinking in practice.

P - Pose the precise question you are trying to answer

R - Reveal your assumptions and biases

E - Explore the uniqueness of the situation

S - See the situation from other's perspective

E - Examine and assess the situation

N - Note your preliminary conclusions

C - Consider all implications

E - Evaluate your recommendations and rationale

of Mind

Presence of mind *noun*

a calm state of mind that allows one to think clearly or act effectively during times of crisis.

P - Pose the precise question you are trying to answer

R -

E -

S -

E -

N -

C -

E -

of Mind

Critical thinking is driven not by answers, but by the questions we ask. It is not possible to be a critical thinker without being a good questioner. Questions arising from the situation synopsis define the scope and goal of our involvement.

Posing the precise question you are trying to answer involves stating a situation, problem or issue that requires a decision. Questions that drive forward our thinking in our area of practice are the essential questions. When we ask essential questions, we deal with what is necessary, relevant and indispensable to the matter at hand. We help solve the problems we need to solve and resolve the issues we need to resolve.

Key Questions

- What is the issue?
- What is the nature of my involvement?
- What is (are) the precise question(s) I'm trying to answer?
- How can I define the problem?

Potential Pitfalls

- Being unclear about the central purpose
- Selecting irrelevant information
- Doing only a surface exploration
- Not considering all of the data
- Asking the wrong questions about the wrong data
- Focusing on one aspect of the situation at the expense of others
- Missing an important intellectual standard

Common Thinking Traps

- Mental filtering
- Emotional reasoning
- Black and white thinking
- Confusing labels with reality

| | |
|----------|---|
| P | <i>Pose the precise question you are trying to answer</i> |
| | |

P -

R - Reveal your assumptions and biases

E -

S -

E -

N -

C -

E -

of Mind

Early in our life, we are taught that assumptions and biases are bad. However, we all carry baggage that contains assumptions and biases. In and of themselves, assumptions and biases are bad only when they are used to manipulate others. If you want to close gaps between your thinking and that of others, you need to reveal your assumptions and biases.

1. Identify questions you want to ask about the idea or situation. These questions will start revealing your assumptions.
2. Now, step back mentally. Change the focus. Take each question and phrase it as an assumption.
3. I “assume” . . . Presenting your assumptions in this way allows for a YES or NO answer. A NO answer means you can remove that assumption from the thought process. A YES answer opens the door to revealing even more focused assumptions.

Key Questions

- What assumptions am I making?
- What biases are influencing my thinking?

Potential Pitfalls

- Not testing assumptions
- Allowing our biases, values and beliefs to drive our decisions about what to consider
- Doing only a surface exploration

Common Thinking Traps

- Mental filtering
- Emotional reasoning
- Black and white thinking
- Confusing labels with reality

| | |
|----------|---|
| R | <i>Reveal your assumptions and biases</i> |
| | |

P -

R -

E - Explore the uniqueness of the situation

S -

E -

N -

C -

E -

of Mind

There is often a tendency to view new situations through the lens of previous situations with which we have been involved. We short-circuit our thinking. We tend to reason that we have “seen this situation before” and proceed with our analysis without diligently checking for differences. To ensure well-reasoned decisions, it is critical that we challenge ourselves to identify what are the unique factors in this particular situation.

Key Questions

- How is this situation similar to other situations I have dealt with? How is it different?
- What are the unique factors of this particular situation?
- How are the environmental factors influencing the situation?
- How are the circumstances surrounding the situation affecting the current situation?

Potential Pitfalls

- Not identifying how this situation differs from similar situations
- Not considering the significance of how the unique factors impact your critical thinking

Common Thinking Traps

- Mental filtering
- Over generalizing
- Confirmation bias
- Emotional reasoning
- Black and white thinking
- Confusing labels with reality

| | |
|----------|--|
| E | <i>Explore the uniqueness of the situation</i> |
| | |

P -

R -

E -

S - See the situation from other's perspective

E -

N -

C -

E -

of Mind

Your point of view can easily distort the way in which you approach the question or see the situation or issue. It is important not only to understand and be clear on the point of view you are coming from; you also need to be able to see the situation from other's perspective.

Key Questions

- How am I looking at this situation?
- Is there another way to look at this situation?
- Is my perspective the only reasonable one?

Potential Pitfalls

- Not studying the points of view that challenge my personal beliefs, assumptions and biases
- Only looking at the situation from one or two perspectives

Common Thinking Traps

- Mental filtering
- Over generalizing
- Confirmation bias
- Emotional reasoning
- Black and white thinking

| | |
|----------|---|
| S | <i>See the situation from other's perspective</i> |
| | |

P -

R -

E -

S -

E - Examine and assess the situation

N -

C -

E -

of Mind

To examine and assess the situation involves more than a mere description of the situation and the collection of data related to the situation. As illustrated in the equation below, assessment is a function of information gathering plus analysis and synthesis. An assessment considers the selected data in enough depth and with enough clarity to convince third-party readers, even those who might disagree, that the conclusion(s) are logical and the selection of recommended options have been well made.

Assessment = Information Gathering + Analysis x Synthesis

Key Questions

- Do my inferences follow directly from evidence to conclusion?
- Are my inferences logical, consistent, and of sufficient depth?
- What is actually implied and what might be carelessly inferred?

Potential Pitfalls

- Focusing on information not related to responding to the questions arising from the situation
- Summarizing rather than synthesizing
- Making unsupported statements

Common Thinking Traps

- Confusing labels with reality
- Over-generalizing
- Confirmation bias
- Fortune telling
- Black and white thinking
- Mind reading
- Mental filtering
- Discounting contrary information
- Using incomplete/insufficient information
- Emotional reasoning

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| E | <i>Examine and assess the situation</i> |
| | |

P -

R -

E -

S -

E -

N - Note your preliminary conclusions

C -

E -

of Mind

Preliminary conclusions are conclusions that are “untested”; it is where our reasoning has taken us.

Key Questions

- Where does my reasoning take me?
- What conclusion, decision, judgment or belief will result from reasoning process?
- What different interpretations might arise from the facts?
- What do I base my conclusion on?

Potential Pitfalls

- Not being explicit in stating the preliminary conclusion that you have reached
- Summarizing rather than synthesizing

Common Thinking Traps

- Confirmation bias
- Black and white thinking
- Using incomplete/insufficient information
- Emotional reasoning

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|----------|--|
| N | <i>Note your preliminary conclusions</i> |
| | |

P -

R -

E -

S -

E -

N -

C - Consider all implications

E -

of Mind

Being able to think through the implications and consequences of your preliminary conclusions is an important critical thinking skill.

Key Questions

- What are the implications of recommended action(s)?
- What consequences might follow beyond the point I've taken the reasoning?
- What unexpected consequences might arise from my conclusion?
- Might any false implications or undesirable consequences follow?
- What are the implications of not taking recommended action(s)?

Potential Pitfalls

- Not being specific and diagnostic in presenting a conclusive statement

Common Thinking Traps

- Over-generalizing
- Discounting contrary information
- Emotional reasoning

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| C | <i>Consider all implications</i> |
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Beware when the great God lets loose a thinker on this planet. Then all things are at risk.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

P -

R -

E -

S -

E -

N -

C -

E - Evaluate your recommendations and rationale

of Mind

The basic difference between examining and assessing the situation and evaluating your recommendations and rationale is that:

- Assessment deals with the information and or data you have obtained or is available to you, the organization and examination of the collected data and the interpretation of the information you have.
- Evaluating your recommendations and rationale is the formal “summing up” of the assessment phase. It is the explanation of the results of your assessment in the form of presenting your case.

Evaluating your rationale allows us to go through a clear and logical process when coming to a decision. It is the ability to reason out a problem and then give a clear explanation of our thought processes.

Self-evaluation: Check to see if I have accomplished my purpose. Is there anything I can do to improve the quality and thoroughness of my work? What did I learn? What would I do differently next time?

Third party evaluation: Key to the evaluation of reasoning is to not only question our own reasoning but to explore our reasoning with the help of a third party. A third party adds a check and balance to your reasoning.

Key Questions

- Where does my reasoning take me?
- What conclusion, decision, judgment or belief will result from reasoning process?
- What different interpretations might arise from the facts?
- What do I base my conclusion on?
- Is the belief, opinion, action or policy in accord with reason and evidence?
- Do my inferences follow directly from evidence to conclusion?
- Are my inferences logical, consistent, and of sufficient depth?
- What is actually implied and what might be carelessly inferred?
- What am I taking for granted?
- Are my assumptions justifiable?
- Where does my reasoning take me?
- What consequences might follow?
- Might any false implications or undesirable consequences follow?

Potential Pitfalls

- Reviewing the process, assuming you have not made a mistake
- Presenting only the conclusion, without the process to support it, for a third party review

Common Thinking Traps

- Over-generalizing
- Confirmation bias
- Black and white thinking
- Discounting contrary information
- Using incomplete/insufficient information
- Emotional reasoning

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| E | <i>Evaluate your recommendations and rationale</i> |
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Critical thinking is driven by questions that challenge the accuracy and completeness of thought. The essence of critical thinking is that it is self-correcting. Go through the process, if you find a flaw start again. Sound thinking skills don't come naturally they need to be developed. We have to put effort not only into our reasoning but also into the evaluation of our reasoning. Our thinking skills become better with proper practice.

About the Author

As a founding partner of The Performance Group, Rob Schnell has worked with a wide range of large and small organizations both in the private and public sector. Over the last 30 years, Rob Schnell has facilitated organizations' success through strategic planning, leadership development, conflict management, team building and coaching. Rob assists organizations improve performance through innovative and participative approaches. Rob's success is based in his ability to ask the tough questions and frame new ways of behaving in memorable, inspiring ways. Rob shares his passion for Critical Thinking in a one-hour presentation, ½-day, 1-day or 2-day course. If you are interested in speaking with Rob about this or other topics, please contact him at rob.schnell@performancegroup.com.

To get more information on the foundation of critical thinking read Rob's paper titled *Critical Thinking* at www.performancegroup.com

Other topics presented by Rob

- Face to Face Leadership
- Creating a Positive Work Environment
- Influencing Difficult People
- Effective Team Communication
- Bullying @ Work
- Survive or Thrive: The Choice is Yours
- Generational Differences at Work

Critical Thinking at the Pace of Life

Presence of mind - noun

- a calm state of mind that allows one to think clearly or act effectively during times of crisis.

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|---|--|---|
| P | Pose the precise question you are trying to answer | |
| | Key Questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the nature of my involvement? • What is the issue? • Why am I involved? | Potential Pitfalls <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being unclear about your central purpose. • Not considering all of the data. |
| R | Reveal your assumptions and biases | |
| | Key Questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What assumptions am I making? • What biases are influencing my thinking? | Potential Pitfalls <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not testing assumptions. • Allowing our biases, values and beliefs to drive our decisions about what to consider. |
| E | Explore the uniqueness of the situation | |
| | Key Questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is this situation similar to other situations I have dealt with? How is it different? • How are the circumstances surrounding the situation impacting the current situation? | Potential Pitfalls <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not indentifying how this situation differs from similar situations. • Not considering the significance of how the unique factors impact your critical thinking. |
| S | See the situation from other's perspective | |
| | Key Questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there another way to look at this situation? • Is my perspective the only reasonable one? | Potential Pitfalls <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only looking at the situation from one or two perspectives. • Not studying the points of view that challenge my personal beliefs, assumptions and biases. |
| E | Examine and assess the situation | |
| | Key Questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do my inferences follow directly from evidence to conclusion? • What different interpretations might arise from the facts? | Potential Pitfalls <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making unsupported statements. • Summarizing rather than synthesizing. |
| N | Note your preliminary conclusions | |
| | Key Questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where does my reasoning take me? • What conclusion, decision, judgment or belief will result from reasoning process? | Potential Pitfalls <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not being explicit in stating the preliminary conclusion that you have reached. • Summarizing rather than synthesizing. |
| C | Consider all implications | |
| | Key Questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What consequences might follow beyond the point I've taken the reasoning? • What unexpected consequences might arise from my conclusion? | Potential Pitfalls <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not being specific and diagnostic in presenting a conclusive statement • Not considering implications of not taking recommended action(s)? |
| E | Evaluate your recommendations and rationale | |
| | Key Questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there anything I can do to improve the quality and thoroughness of my work? • What did I learn? | Potential Pitfalls <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not considering the consequences that might follow beyond the point you have taken the reasoning • Not seeking a third party review of reasoning. |

PRESENCE of Mind – Worksheet

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| P | <i>Pose the precise question you are trying to answer</i> |
| | |
| R | <i>Reveal your assumptions and biases</i> |
| | |
| E | <i>Explore the uniqueness of the situation</i> |
| | |
| S | <i>See the situation from other's perspective</i> |
| | |
| E | <i>Examine and assess the situation</i> |
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| N | <i>Note your preliminary conclusions</i> |
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| C | <i>Consider all implications</i> |
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| E | <i>Evaluate your recommendations and rationale</i> |
| | |

Insights