The Importance of Critical Thinking

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Executive Summary

Critical thinking skills that enable sound decision making are rarely inherent in an employees’ approach to solving problems for the organization. These skills enable an individual to avoid mistakes by recognizing when assumptions or incorrect inferences are present, as well as other situations that require additional exploration of a situation to ensure factual data. Critical thinking skills may not be a competency employees bring into the workplace, but they are teachable and should be a part of every organization’s learning plan.

The Problem

Have you ever examined another person’s solution to a problem and found yourself frustrated and asking yourself “What were they thinking?!” when you realize that the person’s actions have actually compounded the problem rather than solving it? Most of us have, and often times it is due to a lack of critical thinking.

Dictionary.com defines critical thinking as “the mental process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information to reach an answer or conclusion.” In other words, it is the ability to look into our own thought processes, actively analyze and evaluate information, and question conclusions based on observation, experience, reasoning and good communications.

Characteristics of Critical and Non-Critical Thinkers

The core values associated with critical thinking are desire for clarity, accuracy, and precision based on sound evidence and good reasoning. Because of this, there are distinct differences between individuals who possess critical thinking skills and those who lack them.

Critical thinkers have a blend of skills that include the rationality and self-awareness required to question thoughts and logic. They are open minded and possess the ability to challenge their own beliefs and explore multiple options after weighing the evidence. They also have the discipline to see the deductive process through to supportable conclusions without being led astray by false logic. Critical thinkers are also skeptical about information presented as “facts” and seek confirmation and validation prior to acceptance. Critical thinkers actively seek and process information when working a
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problem and do not rely on others for an interpretation of the situation. In other words, they are problem solvers.
Non-critical thinkers accept information at face value and fail to see subtleties. To them everything is either black or white. They are often closed minded and view the world from an egocentric perspective, holding that their thoughts, beliefs and “facts” are the only relevant ones. They are passive participants when it comes to challenges and they rely on others for instruction or interpretation of the situation. In other words, they lack effective problem solving abilities.

Why Critical Thinking Skills are Important

People who lack critical thinking ability often fail to take the time or effort to collect all of the details about a situation. Then, in the absence of accurate data, they make decisions that are expensive, create headaches, and compound an already bad situation.

These types of scenarios play out time and time again in companies all over the world. The impacts of these scenarios can include millions of dollars in lost profits, off spec products, unnecessary downtime, frustrated employee and supervisors, lack of group cohesion or direction, and possibly even grievances or lawsuits. And the most important thing about these outcomes is they are all avoidable.

Making decisions without critical thinking can create operational upsets and complicate existing problems making them more difficult to resolve than when they first occurred. For example, process variables that were already abnormal get worse and those that were stable at the outset may become unstable. With so many process variables disrupted the evidence of what initially went wrong becomes cloudy and difficult to discern. This leads to increased downtime and a potentially dangerous or costly situation.

What This Means to Employers

Critical thinking is as old as Buddha and Socrates. However, just because critical thinking has been around for ages does not mean that it is a common practice. First of all, no one is born with critical thinking ability. It is only through experience and exposure that these skills develop. Depending upon the source of education and family environment, a person may miss the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills. Studies on the state of critical thinking in higher education report that most college faculty at all levels lack a “substantive concept of critical thinking” and that rote memorization and short-term study habits are still the norm for students, leading to very low development of critical thinking ability.
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So what does this mean to employers? It means many employees entering the workplace will not have the ability to think critically and work through complex situations. But there is some good news. A lack of critical thinking skills is not permanent, it can be developed.

Like a muscle, the brain must be exercised in order to gain strength and enhanced performance. With proper training minds can be sharpened and the ability to analyze, process, and interpret data can be honed.

Through carefully designed training programs students can learn to challenge their own thought processes, analyze situations, and arrive at logical conclusions. The more practice a person receives on these skills, the more efficiently and effectively that person becomes at spotting faulty logic and false premises.

How to Improve Critical Thinking Skills

When selecting a training program it is important to select one that has been carefully and methodically designed to introduce key concepts and provide guided practice activities which increase comprehension and learning retention. These programs should provide individuals with a supportive learning environment and the opportunity to safely learn from his or her mistakes.

Training that simply provides a support tool and a step-by-step “how-to” process will fail to develop critical thinking in the participants since it requires little thought to follow a simple process. This training may also lead to a false sense of security and a belief that individuals are competent to make complex decisions when in fact they lack that ability.
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Resources Referenced
http://www.criticalthinking.org/
http://www.buzzle.com/articles/teaching-critical-thinking.html
http://personaldevelopmentmaster.com/how-to-develop-critical-thinking-skills
http://www.criticalreading.com/critical_thinking.htm
http://www.criticalthinking.net/howteach.html

TDS Solutions

TDS promotes critical thinking skills throughout all of our training material and we also offer intensive courses that allow students to practice and apply what they’ve learned in a structured, safe environment. The following are some of the courses TDS offers that take critical thinking to the next level:

- **Job-Specific Training** - Provides robust job- and process-specific qualification training for hard and soft skills.

- **Front Line Supervisor Development** - A comprehensive supervisory management program that prevents ill-equipped supervisors from negatively impacting a business by compromising workplace safety, impairing production and tainting the company’s reputation.

- **Process Troubleshooting** - Focuses on an organized and regimented process for resolving upset conditions by using data from instrumentation to determine the cause for the abnormal situation. Participants are given multiple opportunities to practice what they’ve learned with a variety of systems.