

Critical Thinking for the Twenty-First Century:

What it is and Why It Matters to You

By Anne and Charlie Kreitzberg

In the 21st century there have been real shifts in the way we live and work as well as in how we get and evaluate information. These changes mean we need to look critically at critical thinking itself and determine what approaches are most effective to meet the challenges and opportunities we face.

Critical thinking is about getting to good decisions. Every day we make thousands of decisions. Most are minor, others more significant. Occasionally, one is life-changing. While there is no way to predict what will happen in the future, the smartest thing you can do is make the best decisions possible. Over a career or a lifetime, people who consistently make the best decisions will be the most successful. That's why improving your critical thinking skills is so important.

Critical Thinking Leads to Good Decisions

You can apply critical thinking to any kind of decision. Some decisions take months and require complex analyses. Deciding whether to purchase a building or develop a new product can keep a team occupied for a long time. Other decisions are made in the blink of an eye. Should you answer the phone while navigating in traffic or risk missing an important call? If you meet a bear in the woods should you freeze or run? Making the wrong decision in these circumstances can have serious consequences.

Critical Thinking Gives You an Edge

Whether you have 10 seconds or 10 months, your decisions will benefit from better critical thinking. When you are thinking critically you get a clear grasp of the situation, look at the evidence, draw the best conclusions you can and take appropriate

action. People who do this consistently have a real edge.

You Already Have the Basics

Everyone is a critical thinker to some extent. Offer a five year old the choice between a large beautiful cookie and a small crumbly one, she will quickly analyze the situation and pick the better one. The ability to analyze a situation and draw conclusions starts in early childhood and becomes more effective as we mature.

As adults, we make a lot of good decisions. But not always. While we all have the capacity to think critically, we don't always do it and we may not always do it well. By committing to being a better critical thinker and improving your critical thinking skills, you will find yourself consistently making better decisions; this will benefit you and those who work with you.

Critical Thinking is a Lifestyle

Being a critical thinker is a lot more than learning a collection of techniques. It is a mindset that you adopt and apply on a consistent basis. Having critical thinking skills but not using them does not improve your track record.

Becoming a better critical thinker is like becoming a better athlete. We are all born with the ability to move but to develop our athletic skills we need to learn technique and practice. People who are

athletic are usually good at multiple sports but excel at one or two. Critical thinkers also approach most problems effectively but excel in specific areas.

The decision to build your athletic skills is a lifestyle decision. To be a competent athlete you need to live a healthy and active lifestyle. Critical thinking is also a lifestyle issue. Critical thinkers approach every situation by trying to evaluate it accurately and make the best possible decision at the time. Critical thinking is more than a collection of techniques – it is a mindset and way of thinking

Critical Thinking in the 21st Century

Critical thinking has a long history. Scholars usually begin with the Greek philosopher Socrates who laid out a form of questioning that was highly disciplined and focused on logic. In the 2500 years that followed, many thought leaders added their ideas about what critical thinking should be.

Is critical thinking in the 21st century different from critical thinking in the past? Yes and no.

The fundamentals of critical thinking – gathering good evidence, separating facts from opinions, recognizing assumptions (yours and others), and drawing accurate conclusions are still solid ways to approach decision-making.

But in the 21st century there have been real shifts in the way people live and work and in how we get and evaluate information. These changes mean we need to look critically at critical thinking itself and determine what approaches are most effective in the current environment.

Information Technology

One obvious difference in how we get information is the Internet. Anyone can publish anything and make it available to almost everyone in the world. Searching for information in this vast chaotic

information ocean is difficult. You can never be sure you have seen everything that is important and relevant. Much of the information, by design or error, is wrong or biased. And much of the worst information is carefully packaged up and spun to persuade and deceive. The Internet is a vast and invaluable but treacherous resource. Thinking critically about how you are using it is very important.

Globalization

Globalization is a second 21st century trend that is changing the way that business is done. We are now at the beginning of a truly global society. A lot of businesses grew up in an era where companies were concentrated in a single country.

“International operations” were a smaller part of the business. In time, they grew into “multinational” businesses where operations expanded into more countries.



Today even small companies may operate on an integrated global basis. There’s a good chance that you will find yourself working with people in other countries as part of virtual teams. Working remotely from your colleagues requires a great deal more planning than when you see them all the time. Working globally adds other considerations,

like differences in culture, communication, work style or even scheduling time to meet. Technology has made it easier and cheaper to exchange information and collaborate, making all of this possible.

Energy

A third we face in the 21st century is how we use energy. In the past, business processes were built on the assumption of limitless and inexpensive oil, gas and coal. Dwindling supplies and growing concerns about pollution and global warming are challenging this economic assumption. How will this affect business? Here is one example. On November 9, 2007, Marketplace – a radio show produced by American Public Media – aired a story on the processing of American trash. According to this story, American trash is shipped 7000 miles to China and recycled into cardboard boxes. These boxes are then used to pack Chinese-made consumer products that are then shipped 7000 miles back to the United States (American Public Media, 2007). Some might say it's an elegant way to recycle. But it only works economically if fuel costs are low. Accounting for higher oil prices and the environmental impact of transportation, it may no longer make sense.

What You Can Do Now

Looking further into the 21st century, we cannot even begin to see how the changes to society and business will play out. But it is clear that what we really need at this time in history is critical thinking. The best way to thrive in a time of change is to question your assumptions. Be open to seeing the world in new ways. Make sure you're working with current information rather than old beliefs. Understand how to make good decisions, more consistently. Commit to make critical thinking a habit.

Reference

American Public Media. (2007, November 9). *Garbage Across the Pacific*. Retrieved October 11, 2010, from Marketplace: http://marketplace.publicradio.org/display/web/2007/11/09/consumed2_mm_8/

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