

Improving Critical Thinking Skills

By Ed O'Neil, Principal, O'Neil & Associates

Supervisors often cite poor critical thinking skills among staff as to why they do not delegate more. Mentors often see the lack of critical thinking skills as a career limiting deficit, and coaches frequently identify poor critical thinking skills as the source of other leadership problems that beset the people they work with. Even if the senior supervisor, mentor, or coach has great critical thinking skills themselves, the knowledge is often more tacit and difficult to make explicit as an objective pathway for improvement.

Critical thinking is one of the most challenging skills to teach. But the development of these skills can be made more transparent by establishing a definitive set of questions to structure the analysis of the situation and choice of a next action. I think they offer a good way to develop these skills in those around you and perhaps even useful for yourself. Below are eight steps to improve critical thinking skills.

1. State the general purpose of the work before you as clearly as possible. — answering the question, doing the task, or completing the project. Why am I doing this? What am I trying to achieve? From the Greeks to our day, the role of aim in purposeful action has been essential. We think in terms of causal links toward those aims and being clear about the target helps deliver the arrow.

2. To achieve this purpose, it is essential to have a **more immediate goal** that can guide behavior and action. Has the goal been clearly stated and understood by all relevant parties? Does it make sense that this goal will lead to achieving the stated purpose? Are there competing goals that offer an alternative path to the purpose? What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of each of the different pathways to the purpose?

3. Once a goal is selected, list the **linear steps** to get the work done. What needs to be done technically to achieve the goal? This is a pretty straightforward undertaking that should not be overthought. What are the steps that will be needed to achieve this result?

4. Put the question, task, or project into a **broader context** or framework. There are many choices for these frameworks. Strategic, academic, personal, or a methodological process all offer different frames for evaluating a course of action. Each has a distinctive set of values, rules, returns, and risks. As it turns out, there are multiple ways to understand, value, and act on something. Partly this is an ordering of aims. Am I doing something as an end in and of itself, or am I doing it instrumentally to achieve a higher or more valued goal? The context is also a vehicle for communication to others about the work and their role in it.

5. Assess the **reasonableness** of the aim, goal, process, and their fit to the broader context. This is the heavy lifting of critical thinking, and the work involves several important steps. First, an awareness of the first four steps is required. Next, an evaluation of the logic of these. Do they fit together? Will the steps lead to the goal? Does the aim achieve what we desire? What evidence have we or others offered to support these four questions? What is the value of this information?

Is it more fact or opinion? Have we chosen the most valuable context in which to place them? Finally, does this fit from top to bottom in a consistent and systematic fashion? Sometimes this step involves a “sniff” test — the formal

Leadership Tips

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logic is there, but something seems amiss. It is a form of reasonableness, but it is a balancing of our purely rational thinking with intuitive judgement.

6. Speculate about the **political context of the work you are doing.** Imagine this from the perspective of others — how will they see and value this undertaking? This involves empathy, the capacity to place yourself into another’s shoes with understanding and acceptance. The easiest of all questions to ask of this is “how would I feel or react if I was on the receiving end of this?” The more you can suppress your bias and prejudice when answering this will increase the value of what you get from this process. We usually think of empathy as being directed by another individual. When its object is another organization or part of an organization, we call it situational awareness, but it is the same process. However, this may take some inquiry and investigation to know what the other group values, fears, aspires to, and what they think of us past, present, and future.

7. Humans have a capacity to **think backward and forward in time,** and this capacity can be used to improve your critical skills. This capacity is how we put all of the insight in the items above into a useful array of thought and action. It goes something like this:

- Where am I going with this work (proxy here for question, task, project)?
- What steps will I need to take to get there?
- Why is this valuable, past and present?
- Is all of this reasonable?
- If I take these steps, who will be happy, and who will be annoyed?

Given the answers to these, what do I need to know to understand what is needed next? Is it more information or am I ready for an action?

8. Check your biases. First try to see what filters you bring to understanding the work. For instance, you may be very familiar with this type of work and have done it many times before. If that is the case, you may not be open to recognizing the potential value of the perspectives of others. Or, you may have a preset bias about the value of the contributions of certain people determined by their training, status, age, gender, or other irrelevant characteristic. This unconscious bias will lead to not valuing their contributions. Try to recognize which filters you have — and we all have them. Second, check the biases at the door. Don’t let them cloud your thinking. Finally, as most if not all bias is unconscious, the best way to improve critical thinking is not by our will, but by structures, such as outside review, second opinions, and obligations to include certain information, that can force a diminution of the bias.

These suggestions can be used to improve your critical thinking skills or the skills of those that you supervise, mentor, or coach. It is helpful to keep a journal and frame the work described above in one place. Asking someone you supervise to do the same can help them enhance their skills. Review their process with them and make suggestions about ways to expand their thinking.

About Ed O'Neil

Ed O'Neil, PhD, MPA, is the owner of O'Neil & Associates, a management consulting and leadership development firm focused on change and renewal in the health care system. He was previously professor in the Departments of Family and Community Medicine, Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences (School of Nursing) at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). At UCSF, he served as the director of the Center for the Health Professions, a research, advocacy, and training institute that he created in 1992. His work over the past three decades has focused on changing the US health care system through improved policy and leadership. To learn more, visit www.oneil-and-associates.com; contact Ed O'Neil at herringoneil@gmail.com.

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