

Applying Critical Thinking Skills in the Workplace

In the 2018 Future of Jobs Report published by the World Economic Forum, critical thinking been identified as one of the skills that is increasingly required in the workplace. This report underscores the relevance of critical thinking skills at work. As simple as the term may seem, many people do not have a thorough understanding of it. It is often seen as not very different from conventional thinking which we all engage in on a daily basis. In that sense, we can all be said to possess critical thinking skills but unfortunately, that is not the case.

Let's consider a scenario where two individuals are faced with similar situations that pose a huge challenge to them. At the end of the day, one of them might handle it much better than the other due to certain skills that he or she possesses. In a tense situation involving persons in a state of fury, someone who is high on emotional intelligence might deal with the situation in a better way. Also, when faced with a daunting task or complex problem, an individual with excellent critical thinking ability might be able to produce a workable solution. It can therefore be seen that certain soft skills can make a world of difference in the workplace.

Critical thinking is the ability of a person to think clearly and rationally about an idea, problem or any other form of natural or artificial phenomena. It is a vital skill for employees and managers, regardless of their position in the organizational hierarchy. Critical thinking enables you to make a reasoned argument based on sound information and the right perspective. Having a well-thought out argument means that you have done sufficient critical thinking and considered the issue from different viewpoints. In our ever-changing world where organizations are faced with multi-faceted problems, managers need to be able to put on different thinking caps as they try to solve these problems. There are no two business problems that are exactly the same and so every problem requires a uniquely different approach and/or solution.

Critical thinking is a skill that can be developed and harnessed in an individual who is willing to make the effort. Critical thinking requires that an individual possesses certain requisite attributes - Critical thinking requires curiosity; an individual who does not want to know or understand more will be content with mere surface thinking. Critical thinking requires open-mindedness because one may have to abandon erroneous beliefs and viewpoints in the light of superior facts and knowledge. Critical thinking requires scepticism as a means of asking the right questions and seeking to get to the root of the matter.

Being a concept that is not thoroughly understood by many, there are quite a number of misconceptions about critical thinking. These include:

- Critical thinking does not inhibit creative thinking in any way, they complement each other. While creative thinking can help generate new ideas or solutions, critical thinking can be used to evaluate the workability of such ideas or solutions.
- Critical thinking does not necessarily make a person an expert in winning arguments or persuading people, even though it enhances our ability to communicate effectively.
- Critical thinking is not about accumulating lots of information but making the best possible use of the information at our disposal by giving them some serious thought. Philosophy is the mother of all disciplines and critical thinking is a skill that was highly valued by philosophers' centuries ago.
- Critical thinking is still a premium skill in the present day workplace and will most likely remain so in the near future.
- Critical thinking is essentially about combining explicit and implicit information in order to make a sound and objective decision. It is a skill that is needed by working professionals regardless of their profession. Both private and public sector organizations are faced with all manners of challenges, many of which require critical thinking to solve.
- Critical thinking can benefit an organization and its people by helping to examine corporate goals and the strategies and tactics outlined for achieving them. It is not enough to deploy a strategy that has worked for your company in the past or is working for a competitor in the present, every single bit of that strategy should be laid bare. Assess relevant issues in the business environment especially opportunities and threats that may affect the company both now and in the years to come. A negligible issue in the present could assume a significant status in the future. Offer a sound argument in favour of a decision that has been taken or a plan that is in the pipeline. Unless a manager is able to make a logical business case for a proposed project, senior management may not give approval, funding or support. Examine business problems and decisions in a factual and objective manner.

Any business decision that is ill-grounded is an accident waiting to happen. Business decisions should be based on reliable information rather than bias or sentiments. Rethink the status quo and the way things are done at the moment. This may lead us to asking some pertinent questions - did we adopt this policy or procedure because our competitor did? Are there ways to cut down on costs without compromising quality? What are the future consequences of this project that we have not taken into

consideration? Critical thinking can show us the relevance of and relationships between different ideas and concepts in our attempt to tackle a problem. It is also important to be able to separate facts from fiction and read between the lines to identify subtle contradictions and inconsistencies. It can therefore be seen that critical thinking is useful for solving problems in a practical and systematic manner. This is probably the reason why employers and recruiters alike have a preference for prospective employees who demonstrate critical thinking ability.

Most aptitude tests during job interviews are not meant to test the candidate's ability to retain information but are intended to assess their critical thinking ability. As an employee climbs the organizational ladder to new heights, the need for critical thinking skills will increase. Typically, senior level managers engage in less physical work as their work requires mental effort to a greater degree. And a sizeable portion of this mental effort involves critical thinking. The outputs of their critical thinking including plans, strategies, policies, objectives and procedures will then be passed on to their subordinates for prompt execution. Critical thinking permeates virtually every aspect of a manager's job and is now needed more than ever in the workplace.

Author

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