

Think Better

Gain clarity and wisdom.



by Judy Chartrand

THINK BETTER, AND YOU'LL gain greater clarity and wisdom and make a bigger difference—in your organization and life. After years of being rewarded for results, it's difficult to shift from *action first to purposeful thinking*. Without guidance on how to think more effectively—how to *think better*—we tend to do what we've always done without benchmarking ourselves.

When asked, 78 percent of professionals said they possess *above average* to *exceptional* critical thinking skills—yet surveys show a *serious deficit* of critical thinking. People are not disciplined when it comes to thinking through problems, evaluating information, and making decisions. In the C-suite, *critical thinking* was identified as *the competency most lacking* in the next generation of leaders, and named the number one *hot topic* in executive development.

How can you become a better thinker? Start by adopting the *mindset of an expert*. An *expert* in any field organizes information around principles, whereas a *novice* employs a more random and error-prone approach. Learn to approach problems, make decisions and evaluate opportunities by working through these *five steps* to better thinking:

1. Stop and think about your thinking so that you can apply the correct strategy, given the situation. Figure out the context of the situation, what you are trying to accomplish, and the type of skill you need at this point in time. Sergio Marchionne, CEO of Fiat, took on Chrysler when no else would touch it because he had strategically thought through these questions. In determining the context, he recognized the synergies between Fiat's ability to produce smaller fuel efficient cars and Chrysler's strength in Jeeps and trucks. He also knew that to benefit from these synergies, the company needed to fix quality by refurbishing Chrysler factories and move quickly by reducing bureaucracy. He accurately evaluated the opportunity and knew exactly *what* he wanted to accomplish, *how*, and *by when*.

2. Recognize assumptions that you would otherwise accept as truth based on your prior experience or beliefs. Don't

let opinions, especially those you agree with, slide by as facts without vetting their relevance or accuracy. The ill-fated decision by GAP to change their logo in 2010 was based on seemingly sound but *false* assumptions. Refreshing a brand image often includes a new logo, but the backlash from customers forced GAP to revert back to their classic logo within two weeks. It was a costly mistake. Recognize and test assumptions so that you define the real problem or opportunity. If you don't you may wind up spending a lot of resources on the wrong issue.

3. Evaluate information by clarifying the situation and reviewing what you are trying to accomplish. This helps you determine what type of information and how much you need. Don't swim in a sea of data or irrelevant facts on your way to making a decision. Clutter is the enemy of effective evaluation. Gather only information that is necessary to draw a sound conclusion. *Quality* is the key, not *quantity*. Review only *relevant* and *accurate* information,



and ignore the rest. Check your biases to ensure that you aren't being swayed by *wishful thinking* or *unfounded fears*. Mergers and acquisitions often fail because leaders see the possibilities more clearly than the problems. Know your blind spots and surround yourself with *truth-seekers* rather than *ya-sayers* so that you conduct a *balanced review*.

4. Draw conclusions that follow logically from the evidence. Avoid jumping to a conclusion because of time pressure or over-generalizing beyond the evidence. The great recession was brought on by organizations that drew conclusions that extended beyond solid information or clear intentions. Before drawing a conclusion, reflectively ask if it matches what you are really trying to accomplish and the evidence at hand.

5. Develop a plan of action that helps you anticipate consequences and brings your decision to life. Use those project management skills to get the right resources in the right place at the right time. This step is about *creating success*. Action plans get bogged down because

people implementing the plan often aren't privy to how decision makers went through the first four steps. Make sure everyone understands the rationale and the thought process, especially if they didn't participate in the first four steps. Revisit the question, *What skill do I need at this time*. The skill might be *fostering teamwork*, *communicating vision*, or hands-on *planning* and *delivery*. Choose the right skills and stay active until the plan is complete.

Critical thinking is the foundation for sound decision-making, problem-solving, strategic thinking, and creativity. It is a *way of thinking*, on any topic, in which you skillfully take charge and impose intellectual standards and a systematic process to achieve goals. It involves full consideration of underlying motivations, emotions, and intellectual dynamics—critical thinking is not a cold analysis, but a comprehensive and skillful synthesis of these dynamics.

Leadership requires critical thinking daily. You can't be a *leader* without being a *critical thinker*. Successful leaders apply what they know to the challenges of their work. Organizations today desperately need leaders who are independent thinkers, who can accurately size up situations, make astute judgments, and by *thinking better* make a difference.

Critical thinking skills drive *Strategic thinking*, the *ability to create a vision*, and the *ability to understand the total enterprise and how parts work together*. You need to climb to the 30,000 foot view and analyze a dynamic system, while simultaneously and adeptly analyzing information to quickly make decisions. It is not an easy task. *You may make choices with too little time and too little information*. It requires courage and a strong stomach. So, cultivate the ability to stand back from day-to-day functions, sort through the complexity, and see the where value is truly being created.

The other competency gap is positively motivating and influencing others, which ultimately drives the ability to lead change, inspire others, and engage employees around a single vision.

Incoming leaders will desperately need to close the gap so they can effectively deal with the Rubik's Cube-type issues facing leaders today. Successful strategic leadership will include both critical thinking skills and a keen social intelligence and level of empathy that empowers and energizes healthy momentum and change. PE

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