

Critical Thinking for business and human resource development.

www.younevercantell.co.uk

Some background.

In human resource development and management consultancy, we can be so obsessed with the presentation of what is being said, that we ignore content itself, and whether it is logical. This is where **Critical Thinking** becomes significant.

Although Critical Thinking has a pedigree embedded in the educational and philosophical worlds, it is only now beginning to have a higher profile within the business and public sector communities.

Active listening and the phrasing of different styles of question are key lubricants in easing business activity. These lubricants have resonance in the conduct of meetings, appraisals, interviews and presentations to name a few.

Additionally, Critical Thinking places emphasis upon the quality of what is being said, so that the process of dialogue is not just about superficial presentation. In the world of soft-skills, this is probably one of the most important **transferable skills** to have.

Hitherto, staff training programmes have largely ignored Critical Thinking, at a cost to the quality of customer-care, decision-making, team-working, resource use and project management. Critical Thinking has particular resonance when scrutinising the **credibility of evidence** presented to an audience. It is not by chance that it is relevant to occupations having to diagnose situations and to handle evidence ie medical, legal and police professions.

More..

What is Critical Thinking?

It is a set of techniques which enable you to reason tightly, to assess the credibility of evidence and to construct sound **arguments**.

What it is not?

It is not about thinking negatively. Neither should it be confused with lateral thinking, which is about developing new insights and perspectives to solve a problem. It is about ensuring that existing reasoning processes are followed tightly, and that the linkages are carefully scrutinised.

What is an argument?

In the context of Critical Thinking, it is not describing a quarrel or a difference of opinion. Instead, it is a line of thinking which starts with a series of **reasons** leading to a **conclusion**. Linking the two is an element of logical **persuasion**, as otherwise, what you are being given is an explanation, propaganda or a summary. A final conclusion can be signposted by **Intermediate Conclusions**. Along the way, one may pick up the use of **assumptions, hypothetical or suppositional reasoning, flaws, counter-arguments** and **analogies**.

Language in Critical Thinking.

We use words instinctively without giving real attention to their significance. In Critical Thinking, some of these words have particular roles and are termed **“indicator words.”** They tell us where we are in an argument or line of thinking. In meetings, interviews and presentations we should accord careful thought to how we use them, as along with body language, they shape listeners’ perceptions of what they hear.

Words such as “therefore”, “so”, “consequently”, “thus” and “hence” tell us that we are reaching a **conclusion**. Others such as “because”, “since” and “as” tell us we are using **reasons**. Finally, “but” and “however” suggest that we are looking at a **counter argument**.

What makes a successful argument?

It is a line of thinking where reasons, persuasion and conclusions are logically linked. Occasionally, these links may be suspect and then we have **flaws**. The rest of this article is about the different types of flaws that compromise effective Critical Thinking.

More..

Types of flawed thinking.

Ad hominem: We attack the person in a debate rather than their thinking.

Tu quoque: “you too”. You try to prove something because somebody else has already done it. – “You should not arrest me for speeding as you did not arrest him.”

Appeal to pity: An appeal to sympathy to win an argument. “Don’t hit me I am wearing glasses.”

Appeal to authority: Trying to win a point by saying that someone in a powerful position authorises it.

Insufficient evidence: Trying to draw a conclusion using a small sample.

Drawing a conclusion from one case: The car has failed the MOT on one item, so there is no point keeping the car.

Post hoc: Just because something has happened in the past does not mean it will occur again.

Slippery slope: An argument is taken through many stages and each may be weak. “If you have one drink you will become an alcoholic etc.” The cumulative impact is that one is rushed through a line of thinking which may be suspect.

Confusing causes and consequences: “Tall people have big feet, so growing taller means you will get bigger feet.”

Straw-man thinking: In answering a question you select a weak part of it, attack that, and ignore the main substance of the question which may be more difficult to answer.

The Politician’s answer: When faced with a difficult question, you pose another which is easier and answer that.

Confusing sufficient and necessary conditions: “To make an omelette it is necessary to have an egg but it is not sufficient as other ingredients are needed.”

Relevance: “Sixty percent of speeding drivers were found to be wearing green socks.”

Restricting options: “If you don’t book the holiday this morning then you will not get a place.” NB there is no reason why you cannot book earlier.

Selectivity: You have not been given the full picture. You are being economical with the truth perhaps.

Appeal to popularity: “Everyone is doing it.” That is the reason you provide for doing something but it may not be justified or logical.

The relevance to staff development and business.

We are frequently asked to read reports, scan email attachments, receive briefings, observe Powerpoint presentations, listen to interviewee replies and deal with sales pitches. Critical Thinking is another tool that we can harness, so as to make more considered evaluations and judgements.

John Chubb www.younevercantell.co.uk