What is Critical Thinking?

Critical thinking is the ability to look at a situation and clearly understand it from multiple perspectives whilst separating facts from opinions and assumptions. It involves:

- Thinking logically with clarity and precision so that an individual can recognise assumptions
- Using an approach that is objective and accurate to evaluate arguments
- Focusing on information that is relevant to draw conclusions

The RED Model

Critical thinking can be organised into a "RED Model," an organising framework to facilitate learning:

Recognise Assumptions

It is deceptively easy to listen to a comment or presentation and assume the information presented is true even though no evidence was given to back it up. Noticing and questioning assumptions helps to reveal information gaps or unfounded logic. We also need to examine assumptions from different viewpoints.

Evaluate Arguments

The art of evaluating arguments entails analysing information objectively and accurately, questioning the quality of supporting evidence, and understanding how emotion influences the situation. Common barriers include tending to favour information that is in line with a previously held view, or allowing emotions to get in the way of objective evaluation.

Draw Conclusions

Bringing diverse information together to arrive at conclusions that logically follow from the available evidence is crucial when making a decision. People who can do this are careful not to inappropriately generalise beyond the evidence and they can change their position when the evidence warrants doing so. They are often characterized as having "good judgment."

Watson-Glaser Development 1926-2013

The Watson-Glaser has a distinguished history, dating back to its initial development in the 1920s and regular revisions and enhancements have ensured that the test still remains a leading critical thinking appraisal tool today.

It has been used in thousands of private and public sector organisations worldwide as a selection and development tool and in academic settings. It is widely used throughout the law sector to help organisations recruit new employees.

Tips on How to Improve Critical Thinking Skills

Ask basic questions to identify assumptions. Ask yourself, "What is being taken for granted?", "How do I know this is true?"

Rate the quality of different assumptions. Start by identifying and listing the assumptions underlying each scenario, then explore whether each assumption is appropriate (e.g., how likely is this assumption to hold for this situation?). Factor in the implications and consequences of each (e.g., what if this assumption is wrong?).

Watch for persuasion techniques. Does the argument include excessive appeals to emotions in place of sound reasoning? Does it push you toward a conclusion without exploring alternatives? Has key information been left out? Is there anything suspicious about the figures or sources used to support the argument?

Be objective and balanced. Look for information that is clear, relevant, credible and fair. Actively seek out strong evidence for and against all arguments, especially when you favour certain arguments. Take time to take control of your emotions. It is important to balance your emotions with objective evaluation approaches, especially when you deal with controversial topics.

Draw it out. Represent verbal information graphically by using pictures, matrices, hierarchical tree diagrams, flow charts, and/or any other visual representation that may be useful. You can clarify your thinking by translating the verbal into the visual. This will help you make connections that weren't immediately apparent.

Evaluate different conclusions. Generate multiple alternative conclusions based on the evidence. Consider who stands to gain from certain conclusions. Be sure to explore the consequences and impact of different conclusions as part of this process.

Key "RED" Questions to consider when problem solving:

R — RECOGNIZE ASSUMPTIONS

1. What is the key issue/problem that you are trying to solve?
2. What information and facts do you have about this issue?
3. What are your ideas and assumptions that support your strategy or plan?
4. Is there solid evidence to support those assumptions, and what might be some gaps in your reasoning?
5. Who are the key stakeholders and what are their viewpoints?
6. What other ideas should be explored?
7. What else do you need to know?

E — EVALUATE ARGUMENTS

1. What are the pros and cons of the solution you are proposing?
2. What are your biases?
3. Is there someone who has a different opinion that you could run your ideas by?
4. What impact will your decision have on others and how will you handle this?
5. What will be the financial impact of your decision?
6. Who would disagree with your proposed solution and what is the rationale that supports their viewpoint?
7. What key points or perspectives do you need to keep in mind as you evaluate the options?

D — DRAW CONCLUSIONS

1. After evaluating all of the facts, what is the best possible conclusion?
2. What specific evidence is driving your conclusion?
3. Is there new evidence that would impact your decision?
4. What does your common sense and experience tell you to do?
5. What is the timeline for making a decision (e.g., would your decision be different in a month)?
6. What opportunities does your conclusion provide?
7. What risks are associated with your conclusion?