critical thinking

Thinking critically is the ability to analyze a concept objectively, considering the facts and differing perspectives to reach a sound, logical conclusion.

Critical thinking is important because it helps **individuals and teams** more effectively diagnose problems and identify possible solutions that aren't entirely obvious at first. In addition, critical thinking can help resolve conflicts in the workplace. When individuals consider a range of possible approaches to solving a problem rather than relying on bias or snap judgments, they are more likely to arrive at a better solution.

The reason critical thinking is a skill—and not just an automatic thought process—is because most people naturally think "uncritically," making decisions based on personal biases, self-interest, or irrational emotions. Everyone is vulnerable to this type of simplistic thinking—it's human nature. However, there are ways to improve your thought process to be more intentional about thinking critically.

How to Think Critically Developing your critical thinking skills will help you become a valued member of any team—at work, at school, or anywhere that solid decision-making skills are needed.

Here are some ways to improve your critical thinking skills:

Keep the goal in mind
Know your biases and try to look past them
Ask questions and gather information
Evaluate the facts of the situation and all available data
Collaborate and get feedback from others—especially people with different backgrounds to your own
Generate possible solutions, particularly out-of-the-box ideas
Consider the short- and long-term consequences of implementing each solution

Critical thinking takes time. It might be quicker simply to take instruction at face value, or rely on the traditions of your team. But without analyzing the reasons behind decisions and tasks, it becomes *extremely easy to adopt bad habits*. This might be time-wasting meetings, inefficient uses of effort, or poor interactions with team members. Taking the time to ask "why" you're doing something is the first step to thinking critically. Sometimes, data is available which allows you to make reasoned decisions based on absolute facts. If you can show that a new best practice can objectively improve current processes with hard data, you've used the very basics of critical thinking. That said, actual numbers aren't always available when making a decision. Real critical thinking involves taking a careful look at situations and making a decision based on what is known, not what is felt.

Once you've analyzed a situation with an open mind, you need to consider how to *communicate it properly*. It's all very well and good to approach situations with objective logic, but it doesn't do you any favors to sound like Mr. Spock when you're conveying your conclusions. Be tactful, patient and humble when you are explaining how and why you've come to decisions. Use data if available to support your findings, but understand that not everyone is able to remove emotion from situations.

The final, and perhaps least obvious, application with critical thinking is *creativity*. Often, getting creative means pushing boundaries and reshaping convention. This means taking a risk — one that can often be worth the reward. Using a critical thinking approach when getting creative can help you mitigate the risk, and better determine what value your creativity can bring. It will help you and your team try new things and reinvent current processes while not changing the goals and objectives of your team.

How can you increase your critical thinking, communication and creativity?