



FIVE STEPS OF A CRITICAL THINKER

FIVE STEPS TO BETTER CRITICAL-THINKING, PROBLEM-SOLVING, AND DECISION-MAKING SKILLS

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Gone are the days when management expected workers to check their brains at the door and do only as told. As knowledge workers in today's age of information, you will be expected to use your brains in thinking critically. You'll be solving problems and making decisions, either individually or as parts of teams. The decisions reached will then be communicated to management, fellow workers, clients, the government, and the public.

Faced with a problem or a perplexing issue, most of us do a lot of worrying before separating the issues, examining the facts, and reaching a decision. All that worrying can become directed thinking by channeling it into the following procedure. To make the best decisions and to become valuable knowledge workers, follow this simple five-step plan.

1. Identify and clarify the problem. Your first task is recognizing that a problem exists. Some problems are big and unmistakable, such as failure of an air-freight delivery service to get packages to customers on time. Other problems may be continuing annoyances, such as regularly running out of toner for an office copy machine. The first step in reaching a solution is pinpointing the problem area.

2. Gather information. Learn more about the problem situation. Look for possible causes and solutions. This step may mean checking files, calling suppliers, or brainstorming with fellow workers. For example, the air-freight delivery service would investigate the tracking systems of the commercial airlines carrying its packages to determine what went wrong.

3. Evaluate the evidence. Where did the information come from? Does it represent various points of view? What biases could be expected from each source? How accurate is the information gathered? Is it fact or opinion? For example, it is a fact that packages are missing; it is an opinion that they are merely lost and will turn up eventually.

4. Consider alternatives and implications. Draw conclusions from the gathered evidence and pose solutions. Then, weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative. What are the costs, benefits, and consequences? What are the obstacles, and how can they be handled? Most important, what solution best serves your goals and those of your organization? Here's where your creativity is especially important.

5. Choose and implement the best alternative. Select an alternative and put it into action. Then, follow through on your decision by monitoring the results of implementing your plan. The freight company decided to give its unhappy customers free delivery service to make up for the lost packages and downtime. On the job, you would want to continue observing and adjusting the solution to ensure its effectiveness over time.