

Sample: Podcast Script

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Everybody hates a critic — when it comes to movies, books, art, and music. In a team environment, being a critic can be a highly valued soft skill, one that can help you lead your team through challenges and guide them towards success. Critical thinking is a skill you can learn and continue to develop throughout your career, and in today’s lesson we’ll go over why it is an important skill, and what you can do to practise and improve your critical thinking skills.

So, what defines “critical thinking”? It is much more than providing feedback on a problem; according to Drs. Linda Elder and Richard Paul, founders of the Foundation for Critical Thinking, the skill can be defined as, “the art of analysing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it.” They break down the skill into three fundamental components:

Analysis

Evaluation

Improvement

Analysis breaks down the structures of thinking; Evaluation is about the quality of thought; and Improvement takes your analysis and evaluation into account to improve the quality of your thoughts and take action. Together these components result in the ability to have an objective view of a problem and come up with a creative solution for it. It is an important leadership skill for evaluating progress, making decisions, and producing results. Critical thinking is the art of analysing and evaluating the way you think, with the aim of improving it. Why is critical thinking beneficial in leadership positions? Well, consider how often you come across the same problem twice. It’s quite rare, isn’t it? You’re almost never confronted with a problem you already have the perfect solution for. To grow successfully as a leader, you must be able to learn new information and adapt accordingly, both problem-solving and learning are more easily achieved when you’re able to think critically about your needs. Critical thinking can also bolster the knowledge economy of your workplace, as it encourages self-reflection and self-reliance, and improves decision making at all levels — according to Indeed[dot]com, practised critical thinkers are happier and more efficient in the workplace.

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Now we'll begin to learn what we can do to develop and improve critical thinking skills, and find ways to practise them on a day-to-day basis.

In a post on their Career Guide blog, Indeed[dot]com breaks down the five essential elements of critical thinking skills. These essential elements make up the building blocks of the fundamental components of critical thinking that you learned about earlier in this episode. The five essential elements of critical thinking are:

Observation

Analysis

Inference

Communication

Problem Solving

How do each of these "essential elements" relate to the fundamental components of critical thinking?

Observation and Analysis fall under, of course, Analysis.

Inference falls under Evaluation

Communication and Problem-Solving make up Improvement

Of course these five essential elements can be found in all three of the components. Think of the fundamental components of critical thinking as forming the points of a triangle. They all exist in relation to one another, and if you remove one it collapses the structure of the triangle. The five essential elements of critical thinking live within the body of the triangle. Sometimes Analysis will draw Observation to its corner, leaving analysis and the rest to be used by Evaluation and Evaluation. Other times Evaluation might borrow Inference and Problem Solving. It is not an exact science, and just like any soft skill, the elements of critical thinking are adaptable to whatever crossroad you find yourself at.

Together, these five essential skills can see you through any problem, whether you are using them individually or in cooperation with each other. Breaking down umbrella concepts into smaller ideas helps to make the skills within them more approachable and easier to practise. After a short break, we'll go through each of these essential elements one by one, and break down what they mean and what you can do to practise and develop these essential critical thinking skills.

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Welcome back to our lesson on critical thinking. When we left off, we had just learned the five essential elements of critical thinking: observation, analysis, inference, communication, and problem solving. These five essential elements correspond to the three foundational concepts of critical thinking; analysis, evaluation, and improvement. No matter how you

break them down, the outcome is the same: critical thinking is the ability to evaluate and observe a thought with the intention of improving it.

In a leadership position, critical thinking is used to solve problems, accelerate growth, and provide actionable feedback for your team. Think back to the last time you received good feedback on your performance or a project. What did the other person say to you that might indicate that they were using critical thinking skills? ---- short pause ----

This skill set won't appear in your toolbox overnight; critical thinking skills need to be practised just the same way you would practise a practical skill like driving a car or cooking. It is necessary to practise each of the essential skills on their own to familiarise yourself with the ways they can be used together — like learning how to break and accelerate in a car, how to change gear, and how to signal so that you can successfully drive in traffic with other cars speeding past you. The skills used in critical thinking are considered “soft” skills, which means it is difficult to measure your progress with them the way you would a practical skill. There is no driving test for observation, so you will be relying on self-discipline to manage your own success.

Observation

Observation, in a leadership context, is the ability to notice opportunities, problems, and solutions and it is the cornerstone of critical thinking. A good observer can sniff out problems at their start, and will also be able to zoom out to see the systemic issues that might have caused the problem in the first place. A good observer can work proactively by finding areas of improvement, and earmarking them for further development.

Mindfulness and mindful meditation is one of the best exercises you can do to train your observation skills. Mindfulness teaches you to quiet the noise around you, and move through the world at a more intentional pace. In other words, it teaches you to slow down and smell the roses. Meditation teaches you to clear the noise in your mind, and begin to observe your inner life objectively. Why are these important in a leadership context? These techniques, when practised together, teaches your brain to pay attention to its surroundings in a meaningful way, allowing you to approach situations without judgement.

Why is it important to stop and smell the roses? I can almost hear you rolling your eyes at the suggestion — think of how many details you miss on a day to day basis. Do you actually remember how you got to work today? How many people were on the same route to work as you? Are the leaves changing colour around your office? ---- short pause ----

Mindfulness and meditation can help you answer these questions, rather than speed through life in a daze and miss out on important details that could help you down the line. Judgement and ignorance can cloud your view of an opportunity or a problem. What is a “bad” opportunity anyway? It is only an opportunity that was passed over without the right

consideration or preparation. Mindfulness and meditation teach you to observe at face value, allowing you to consider a situation for what it is, rather than what you think it is.

Journalling, active listening, and reading are a few other techniques that you can practise to train your observation skills. As you start to train this skill, you'll find that paying close attention becomes easier, taking a moment for a second look will eventually become second nature.

Analysis

Practising critical observation skills is the first step to nurturing critical thinking skills.

Observation is key to critical thinking, but what do you do with all of that information you've observed?

Analysis is the skill of processing and interpreting the data you receive through observation. Let's say a complicated data set is dropped onto your desk, what do you do with it? Combing through and taking notes on that data might be the first step, but your work doesn't end there. You will always be expected to extrapolate meaning from that data. That extrapolation is the essence of analysis.

Just as we did with observational learning and practice, we will be looking away from work to improve your analytical skills, and the exercise is deceptively simple. The best way to flex your analytical muscles is simply: to step out of your comfort zone. In practice, stepping out of your comfort zone might mean reading about unfamiliar concepts, expanding your social circle, or committing to new hobbies. The trick to learning and practising analytical skills is to force yourself to expand your worldview.

Practising analysis is difficult because this is a passive activity; the goal is to start creating enough flexibility in your mind to be able to challenge your typical modes of thought. In an article for Harvard Business Review, Helen Lee Bouygues says:

"If everyone in our social circles thinks as we do, we become more rigid in our thinking, and less likely to change our beliefs on the basis of new information."

A flexible mind can easily view a situation from multiple angles, which gives them the ability to draw multiple creative conclusions from the same observations or the same data as someone else. This is important in a leadership role, as it allows you to come up with multiple potential solutions, in case one of them doesn't work out. It also helps you to creatively approach, solve problems with, and provide feedback for those you are leading.

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Thank you for sticking with us, I hope during the break you were able to begin the practice of observing what is going on around you. You're already taking one step out of your comfort zone by listening to this podcast and participating in our exercises and reflection notes. You are already on the path towards improving your critical thinking skills, and as we continue

you'll learn more about why they are important and what you can do to practise these soft skills outside of a work setting, and seamlessly integrate them where you need to.

As we've said before, practising critical thinking skills is more passive than you'd think. It is helpful to find small ways to incorporate the skills you are trying to improve, than to drill yourself with case studies and projects until you finally get that gold star of completion.

Remember: critical thinking is considered a "soft skill" — non-technical skills that describe how you interact with your work, rather than the technical skills you use to complete it. Soft skills compliment hard skills because you need one to get the best out of the other. Soft skills are intangible, which makes them harder to define.

Inference

Inference is a difficult skill to define as it is more conceptual than practical. It can be explained the same way as logic: the skill of drawing logical conclusions based on your observations and analysis. You can use anecdotal experience, fact, logic, or systems of elimination to help infer information from data and analysis. It seems that there is only one way to practise inference; you can create case studies and data sets to drill yourself on the supposedly correct answer over and over again; or, you can look to similar tactics that you used to practise other soft skills.

Strategy games like sudoku or crossword puzzles are a great way to incorporate practising inference in your daily life. Both of these games train your brain to analyse the data available to you, and make logical conclusions regarding the next step. Inference is a difficult skill to practise on its own, in part because logic is a skill that is learned in community. It is deeply integrated into the next essential critical thinking skill, communication.

Communication

We've talked about communication a lot on this podcast. We've discussed how crucial it is in times of change, and for encouraging innovative thinking and a growth mindset. You won't be surprised then to hear that communication is a crucial building block when it comes to critical thinking skills. You want to train yourself to drown out the distraction and communicate effectively with your team, so they can understand all of the ideas you've come up with through observation, analysis, and inference.

You do not work in a vacuum, and you don't develop ideas in a vacuum either.

Communication is the ability to listen to others and voice your own opinion, and knowing when either is appropriate. Contrary to what you may have been told, communication isn't about talking louder and getting your point across. It is the balance of talking and listening, using your other critical thinking skills to navigate effectively through a problem. With clear communication, you'll land on a solution more efficiently than if you barrel through a discussion with your team. The same skills you practised learning observation will aid the development of your communication, since active listening is an essential element of

communicating effectively with your peers. In addition to mindfulness and meditation, journaling is a great way to practise communication, as it helps you to clearly lay out your thoughts.

Problem Solving

We all want to work with someone who is solutions-oriented. How else will you ever progress as a team or individual without a solution mindset? Not only is problem-solving an indispensable skill on its own, without it the tower of critical thinking skills falls apart. The skillset is goal-oriented in that you are practising observation, analysis, inference, and communication in order to better support problem-solving. Critical thinking as a skillset is important to problem-solve for your team, and problem-solving is the essential marker of learning critical thinking skills. The two are entwined like a Möbius strip, one ends as the other begins.

Problem-solving is the final piece of the critical thinking puzzle because it is where you put all the other skills into practice. Drs. Linda Elder and Richard Paul define it as the “improvement of thinking.” You take all the observations you made, logical conclusions, and analyses and use them to inform the solution to your problem. Then, you communicate the solution and how you arrived there in order to move forward.

Thinking critically isn't about critiquing other people's ideas or critiquing your teammates. It is a complex system of skills all chained together to describe the ability to analyse and improve your thinking process. To turn an idea into a solution and not accept a problem at face value. You can practice critical thinking skills by training soft skills like observation and analysis, and engaging in activities that exercise logical inference. To practice these skills, look beyond the workplace by engaging in hobbies that are outside of your comfort zone, and exploring the worlds of mindfulness and meditation. Soon, you won't be thinking about the skill set at all, you'll have adopted these small habits and strategies to incorporate observation, analysis, inference, communication and problem-solving into your daily routine. Thank you for listening to today's episode. Next week, we'll continue by learning about constructive criticism. What makes criticism constructive? And how can you, as a leader, deliver critiques that improve the performance of your team? Don't forget to check today's show notes for key points and resources to help you in your leadership journey.

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