

Business Logic

Lecture 2: Critical Thinking In Business

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Lecture Learning Objectives:

At the end of the lecture, you will be able to:

- 1.) Define critical thinking
- 2.) Relate the study of critical thinking to business management.
- 3.) Examine the different critical thinking skills that are relevant to business practices.
- 4.) Evaluate the importance of soft skills like critical thinking in today's global economy.

MANAGERIAL JUDGMENT AND CRITICAL

IN THE BUSINESS WORLD, the most conspicuous material rewards go to those who demonstrate a capacity to **exercise judgment effectively** in matters involving economic gain or loss. The **market economy offers** ample opportunity to apply one's judgment for profit and advancement.

How to foster development of superior judgment in business matters has been the subject of extensive and amply *financed research* and *experimentation*. The results are manifest in a wide range of training, education, and planned learning experiences. And this massive developmental activity has great relevance to "critical thinking"—and vice versa.

Surely "critical thinking" and "sound judgment" not only are parallel in function but overlap greatly. The **competencies** implied by the term critical thinking have much in common with those we attribute to an effective manager. And, just as surely, the enormous methodological resources available for teaching such management skills as problem-solving and decision-making can be appropriately adapted for teaching critical thinking in the schools. It is, then, not necessary for those who would teach critical thinking to reinvent the wheel. For many aspects of critical thinking, **educators** need only to adapt practices found useful in management training.

As a management consultant **Mr. Exton** searched for a consistent, integrated methodology—one that was so general in its applicability that it could be taught per se, or in relation to virtually any body of content. He wanted an intellectual discipline—at least potentially rigorous—that provided synergistic formulations with a history of successful applications. Fortunately, such a discipline already existed, known internationally as **general semantics**. Its applications in business are well illustrated in *Communication and Organizational Behavior*, by William Haney.

General semantics has been taught at many universities in regular or special courses. Its potentials have been explored in more than 120 doctoral dissertations,

including several that suggest that general semantics can be taught at elementary and high-school levels with positive effects on critical and creative thinking.

Many of us grew up with textbook problems that provided all of the necessary information—and the assumption that all provided information was valid. In the business world (or the world generally) we never have all of the information—and we cannot assume that the information we have is valid.

Critical thinking requires (among other things):

1. *Validity of the information* (observations or data) that underlies the assumptions to which values and logical processes are applied.
2. *Validity of the assumptions*, both initial and sequential, based upon the available information.
3. *Validity of the values* applied in the exercise of evaluative judgment.
4. *Validity of the logic of processes* involved in inference, generalization, deduction, extrapolation, etc.
5. *Recognition of hidden assumptions*, unfounded implications, dubious inferences, subjective orientations, prejudice, bias, slanting, questionable perspectives, etc., both in one's own evaluative process and in the communications of others.

We base our thinking largely on our assumptions. But we are often not conscious of the assumptions entering into our evaluations and decisions. **General semantics** training aims at developing optimum consciousness of assumptions—as well as consciousness of abstracting.

Critical thinking should help us to identify those values most likely to foster valid understanding and to guide our decisions along lines that are best suited to our own long term—rather than short-term—interests.

As we experience the world around us, it is the inevitable tendency of our perceptual function to evaluate our perceptions by association with past experience, and thus, inevitably, in terms of the more-or-less familiar. This process often leads us to notice similarities of a new perception to an old perception—and to disregard significant differences. Once we label the new perception on the basis of similarities alone, we have taken a first step toward uncritical thinking. The more the situation looks familiar, the more likely we are to overlook elements that appear unfamiliar—and that might involve unfamiliar consequences. So, we must learn to be critical of our own perceptions, to silently question, reinterpret, relabel, and reevaluate what our senses tell us.

But the kind of critical thinking that we apply to direct experience will not serve us adequately when we evaluate the communicated experience we derive from the words we hear or read. We must take into account the unique nervous system (mapmaker) that produced those words, the mapmakers' values and perspectives, and the nature of language as a symbolic process.

We must learn to understand the limitations of language and the ways in which the very structure of language distorts communication from the intent of its originator, as well as the ways that communication is subject to distortion through individual poverty of expression, unfamiliar terminology, equivocal vocabulary, misapprehension, etc. But we must also be aware of the ways in which each item of linguistic communication is inevitably shaped by, and reflects, the evaluative and purposive orientations and both conscious and unconscious assumptions of its uniquely individual human origins. Only through such understanding can we begin to detect—and to discount, allow for, and protect ourselves from—bias, slanting, propaganda, planned deceit, and deliberate falsehoods. Only then can we be sensitive to inconsistencies, false assumptions, self-deceptions, deluded beliefs, distorted reportage, and purposeful omissions that characterize so much of what is broadcast, printed, and echoed in the conversations of those we know.

We also require a workable notion of **epistemology**—how we “know” what we claim to “know.” And we need an adequate appreciation of the extraordinary neuro-linguistic processes that enable us to translate our perceptions into words—and to translate the words of others into something meaningful and, we hope, having some correspondence to the intended message. We must learn to “perceive ourselves in the process of perceiving.”

There is one unique methodological discipline that, in a creatively integrated way, addresses both epistemology and neurolinguistics. This dynamic synthesis distinguishes general semantics and renders it outstandingly relevant to the development and exercise of critical thinking.

The most useful and effective pedagogical device for illustrating how language relates to what it is intended to represent is found in the map-territory analogy.

Visualize, if you will, the United States as you know it: a continent-wide expanse of territory, with extremely varied terrain; with all its states, counties, cities, towns, and villages; with rivers, mountains, roads, streets, bridges, railways, power lines, etc., etc.

Now consider a map of the United States, as complete and detailed as any map can be.

The relationship between that “map” and that “territory” can best be summarized in these statements:

1. The map is not the territory. By analogy, words are not the things they represent. This may seem obvious. But we do, far more often than we realize, act as if the word we have used (or heard) is the thing itself, the words on paper are the situation.

2. The map is not all the territory. Even the most detailed map cannot represent all aspects of the territory. Words, no matter how many, can never tell us all about anything.
3. The map is self-reflexive. Every map reflects the map- maker. Words reflect—and tell us something about—the person who speaks or writes them.

Those who learn to apply the three-fold principles of map-territory relationships to what they hear or read (or speak or think) will have made significant progress in the direction of critical thinking, because they will be aware of the perceptions behind the communications.

In this age of the “**Information Explosion**,” we are often over-whelmed by the flood of information available to us. We face an overkill of information—sought and unsought, relevant and irrelevant, reliable and misleading, useful and distracting—all of which makes demands on our time and attention.

To cope with situations of any degree of complexity, we not only must sort out that part of the available information that is useful but also must sense what information is needed for an adequately formed evaluation.

The kind of critical thinking required here is clearly linked to the consonance of words with perceptions, of map with territory, of our perceptions of the problem-situation with the situation “outside our skins.”

Consciousness of abstracting, a key principle in general semantics, reminds us that any process from which we may derive a perception has an infinite number of characteristics, which is why we can never know all about anything. It also reminds us that each person abstracts differently. People do not necessarily abstract the same characteristics, and they evaluate characteristics differently.

This bit of epistemological insight should help us to realize that the process of abstracting is fallible, and the results of that process should be tested—evaluated and reevaluated.

Abstracting should be recognized as a multiorbital process. We can go from the label “apple” to higher-order abstractions (“fruit,” “produce,” “agricultural product,” “item in the market economy,” etc.). However, once we enter upon the process of more inclusive labeling, it will no longer be clear to others that we are still referring to an “apple.”

Critical thinking demands that we seek out the lower order abstractions underlying the higher-order abstractions we use or accept from others. In business as in politics (and in many other forms of human activity as well), we often give or receive higher- order abstractions cut loose from their moorings. The words may sound profound, but we are left to wonder what they refer to in the world “out there.” The extensional orientation recommended by Korzybski includes checking maps against territories,

higher- order abstractions against lower-order abstractions. It requires that we move through levels of abstraction rapidly, using certain levels to validate or test other levels.

It is noteworthy that many managers in business and industry have found in general semantics a coherent methodology for relating their perceptions to an increasingly complex world.



The more the situation looks familiar, the more likely we are to overlook elements that appear unfamiliar—and that might involve unfamiliar consequences.

Exton, 1991

NOTES

1. William V. Haney, *Communication and Organizational Behavior, Text and Cases* (Homewood, 111. : Richard D. Irwin, 1960; rev. ed. 1967).
2. Kenneth G. Johnson, comp., *Graduate Research in General Semantics* (Englewood, N.J.: Institute of General Semantics, 1985).

* William Exton, Jr., was a management consultant and designer of teaching aids. He was president of the Institute of General Semantics at the time of his death in December 1988.

† Adapted from the article of the same title included in *Thinking Critically: A Systematic, Interdisciplinary Approach to Creative-Critical Thinking*, edited by Kenneth G. Johnson (Englewood, N.J.: Institute of General Semantics, 1991).

READINGS AND VIDEOS (Please see the digital copies of the materials.)

Reading 1.1 Exton W. (1991). Managerial Judgment and Critical Thinking in A Review of General Semantics 48 (1) pp. 16-21. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.com/stable/42582311>

Reading 1.2 Noel, L. Pierre, S. & Watson, J. (2017) Critical Thinking, Decision Making and Mindfulness in Fischler College of Education: Student Articles. 16. Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/fse_stuarticles/16

Video 1 Do Companies Actually Want Critical Thinkers? In
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrghdRNb2Dw>

LECTURES (Please refer to the PowerPoint presentations)

ACTIVITY AND ASSESSMENT

Write a 100 – 200 words reflection paper on Why critical thinking matters?

Source: ETC: A Review of General Semantics , Spring 1991, Vol. 48, No. 1, SPECIAL ISSUE: General Semantics: Current Research and Applications (Spring 1991), pp. 16-21
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/42582311>

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+William Exton, Jr.
Institute of General Semantics (JSTOR) 1991