



# Get out your thinking cap

and pass it on to your employees to help solve their own problems

Critical thinking: It sounds like it should be limited to academia; right? Wrong.

While critical-thinking skills are, in fact, central to academic research, they are equally important in the business environment.

As we explore effective techniques to increase visibility and influence in the workplace, we need to become the “professor” of critical thinking for our vital team members. We need to serve as a model for them to follow. Critical thinking, in its simplest of terms, is a questioning process. Consider these three questions to encourage your employees to start thinking critically about their own individual actions:

- I hear your question. What’s your answer?
- What would you do if I weren’t here?
- Are you using your brain or your gut?

## “I hear your question. What’s your answer?”

In their haste to keep projects moving, most management teams instinctively want to provide quick solutions when employees have problems or questions. This approach is archaic in today’s business world and does not foster critical thinking. It teaches employees to

only rely on your strengths rather than developing their own.

Consider this as an alternative: Make it a policy that whenever an employee comes to you with a problem, he or she must also offer at least one solution. Force them to do some advanced thinking. This gives you, then, an opportunity to have a more constructive and fruitful discussion.

## “What would you do if I weren’t here?”

Being a good manager does involve some parenting. Sorry about that. Your job is to use your leadership skills to coach employees to become self-sufficient. Continue to strengthen their critical-thinking muscles by turning the questions back to them, answering a question with a question:

- “What are the downside risks if we take this action?”
- “What if we did A instead of B?”
- “What if the opposite were true?”

In most cases, that employee already knows the answer. Don’t do their work for them; but rather use it as a development opportunity.

## “Are you using your brain or your gut?”

Many managers pride themselves on the soundness of their “gut instinct.” They often make quick decisions based solely on sudden flashes of intuition.

Bad idea! That’s not to say that intuition is invalid. But to be effective, it needs



to be backed up with logic. If you’re modeling decision-making behavior based solely on gut instinct, you might be doing your associates a disservice.

Remember the old bumper sticker “Question Authority”? When an employee comes to you with a gut-based decision, you need to start questioning.

Consider the following questions in your dialogue:

- “Why do you think this will work?”
- “What assumptions have you made?”
- “What alternatives might we consider?”

When an employee’s decision is successful, acknowledge it. Remember: praise in public (and criticize in private). If he or she makes a mistake, use it as a learning opportunity. Our job as leaders is, again, to be the catalyst for positive change. Serve as that role model for others to follow and use your “PhD in critical thinking” to move your company forward. ●

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