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Kepner-Tregoe

Critical Thinking Skills:

Building Blocks for the Next Generation of Leaders

How will you harness the brainpower of your employees to tackle the challenges of the 21st Century?

The Importance of Critical Thinking Skills

Over three decades ago, the U.S. Secretary of Labor appointed a commission to determine the skills our young people would need to succeed in the working world. The commission's fundamental purpose was to encourage a high-performance economy characterized by high-skill, high-wage employment. Although the commission completed its work in 1992, its findings and recommendations ring true in the new millennium.

The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) report identified **critical thinking skills** as being essential for a high-performance workplace. The report identifies a three-part skills foundation: basic literacy and computational skills, the thinking skills necessary to put knowledge to work, and the personal qualities that make workers dedicated and trustworthy. This foundation in thinking skills includes creativity, decision making, problem solving, seeing things in the mind's eye, knowing how-to-learn, and reasoning. The report states: "Today's work place puts a premium on reasoning skills and an ability and willingness to learn."

The findings in the SCANS report have been reinforced in subsequent studies. In 2009 the Economist Intelligence Unit published a report, *The Intelligent Enterprise: Creating a culture of speedy and efficient decision-making*. The report states that "despite the wide recognition that accurate and timely decision-making is crucial, most firms' ability to make good decisions needs improvement."

And finally, in their 2020 Future Jobs Report, The World Economic Forum confirmed that senior executives believe critical thinking and analysis along with problem solving, which have stayed at the top of the agenda year on year consistently, will rise in prominence in the lead up to 2025.

Critical Thinking Skills are Essential

Critical thinking skills can be defined as the ability to exercise sound reasoning and analytical thinking, using knowledge, facts and data to resolve workplace issues. They are essential for:

1. Solving problems and making decisions.
Rapid changes in the workplace require delegating decision making and problem solving farther and farther down the organization. Among today's workers the critical thinking skills for analysis, problem solving, and teamwork are in high demand and short supply.

2. Problem prevention.
Preventing problems does not happen automatically. Identifying potential problems and planning preventive and contingent actions require good, solid analytical thinking.

3. Effective teamwork.
The benefits of teamwork are oft reported; but teamwork is not automatic. Teams experience growing pains and they take time to mature into productive units. Team members need critical thinking skills for communication, conflict resolution, decision making, problem solving, and self-management.

4. Empowerment.
Effective empowerment means providing the responsibilities and the skills for people to manage their own work and to do it effectively. To keep teams cohesive, a common language for solving problems and making decisions is needed. These skills empower people to work together to solve problems, make better-balanced decisions, and manage business-critical projects.

The Need for Process

People often refer to "process" in terms of an engineering process or a manufacturing process. The word process when applied to thinking refers to the series of steps individuals go through to organize and analyze information in order to make judgments about it. Having a mutually agreed-upon process enables all those involved in tackling a business issue, regardless of background or function, to work collaboratively toward a common goal. If these thinking processes are used by every team member, every time, they become second nature to all.

The Challenge of the 21st Century

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that between 2014 and 2024, about 9.8 million new jobs are projected because of employment growth but 35.3 million openings are projected because of replacement needs. A lack of critical thinking skills among new employees compounds the loss of institutional knowledge held by employees leaving the workplace.

As organizations become more global, the diversity of the workforce requires a common approach to resolving organizational issues that can surmount cultural and language barriers.

The information explosion continues to move at a rapid pace with no end in sight. This accelerates the rate that technical knowledge becomes obsolete while exponentially flooding our lives with data. As a result, the ability to organize and evaluate information with an analytic eye is increasingly important.

Putting the puzzle together

Rapid fire changes in the workplace mean increased responsibilities for many employees. These new responsibilities mean that analytical skills, driven by a process that is underpinned by logic and good questioning, are key to maintaining competitive advantage. Sharpening the thinking skills of workers and providing a context in which they want to and can succeed is a key to solving the 21st century challenge of staying competitive in an environment of rapid change.

About Kepner-Tregoe

Kepner-Tregoe is the leader in problem-solving. For over six decades, Kepner-Tregoe has helped thousands of organizations worldwide solve millions of problems through more effective root cause analysis and decision-making skills. Kepner-Tregoe partners with organizations to significantly reduce cost and improve operational performance through problem-solving training, technology and consulting services.

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