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Critical Thinking as a Leadership Attribute

abstract

Leaders are tasked with making decisions that have substantial impact on an organization's well-being. Decision making requires critical thinking and requisite action taking. The nature of critical thinking and how professional development educators can strengthen this attribute are presented.

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All organizations depend on leaders making sound decisions to fulfill their missions. Critical thinking, the analytic precursor to decision making and action taking, enriches best practice organizational outcomes. In health care, these decisions range from resource management, care delivery, program development, and more. Further, moral-ethical issues arise, constituting a different kind of decision making than those mentioned. Decision making can occur without careful critical thinking. The relationship between critical thinking and decision making should be closely linked. The authors posit that, with enhanced critical thinking, better de-

cisions can be made with awareness of downstream and upstream consequences.

Paul and Elder (2008) stated that critical thinking is "the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it" (p. 2). The professional development educator, with this definition in mind, is charged with helping leaders eliminate bias, distortion, partiality, and more to cultivate leader effectiveness in making sound decisions. Learning strategies that help individuals apply critical thinking within their job roles add value to organizational well-being.

HELPING LEADERS DEFINE CRITICALITY

In life, everyone has the ability to think and problem solve. From the early onset of life, trial and error emerges as one way of learning. When success is reached, individuals begin to test how to apply one satisfactory result to other situations. In this process, it is intuitively discovered that some strategies work in one scenario, but not necessarily in all situations. This is the early childhood onset of critical thinking,

to process the experience where a thought worked to another experience, where it may also work or not work. It is known that brain science now informs on how the brain processes, retains, summons, and uses information in life (Howard, 2012).

When training leaders, it is initially important to spend time in concept validation: what is critical thinking? In the movie *Men in Black* (Spielberg, Parkes, MacDonald, & Sonnenfeld, 1997) is a scene in which a group of job applicants taking an aptitude test, not knowing what they are being tested for (Nagendran, 2012). They do this awkwardly on their laps, juggling paper, clipboards, and writing instruments. Only the character portrayed by Will Smith questioned the test and adapted to the setting by rearranging his seat to use a table. This simple example required critical thinking—a low-risk adaptation to the environment to ease and focus on the task at hand.

Later in the film clip, the characters engage in a scenario where the stakes are considerably higher. At this juncture rests a decision about who to—or to not—shoot. The scene includes a little girl in the midst of multiple monsters. The girl is shot. On analysis, this is because she did not fit the context, therefore, was suspect by the shooter. Critical decisions like this scene unfold in real life, not just in movies. Imagine the critical thinking made in war or acts of violence when police officers are involved. In organizations,

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leaders can be asked to dissect the context and decision making linked to their own low- and high-risk scenarios. These scenarios, like those in the movie, are fraught with assumptions, context, and time pressures as influencers to the criticality of thinking.

Paul and Elder (2008) would examine this file clip and identify that leaders must be self-aware to the point where they can examine the situation or problem for clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, and fairness. Using these filters, professional development educators can train leaders to respond to any variety of organizational or clinical situations presented. In a learning session, a participant could be asked to present to the group a high stakes real-life scenario. As a group, questions can be asked:

- How clear is the problem?
- Is the situation accurately presented, and to what extent are the data surrounding it accurate?
- Is there an inherent logic linked to the problem, or is it unclear?
- What is the level of precision needed to solve the problem to begin to frame potential solutions?
- What is the depth and breadth of the problem—do the implications run deep for a single situation, or do the implications have wide-spread consequences?

These questions help professional development educators provide process to enriching critical thinking.

ESSENTIAL INTELLECTUAL TRAITS

Decision making backed by sound critical thinking requires moral character, in addition to cognitive reasoning and skills in managing. The authors believe that the best decisions are made through the lens of criticality when they are coupled with the following traits.

Intellectual Humility

No one has unlimited talents, skills, and abilities, nor the capacity to capture the unlimited knowledge in our midst. Leaders who are intellectually humble are those who wisely use the knowledge they possess but are equally aware of knowledge they need or do not have within their grasp. They humbly seek this knowledge.

Intellectual Courage

Leaders with this type of courage are willing to speak out against group norms when it is called for. Best decisions, based on critical analysis and best thinking, may require going against the grain of group think, specifically in high-stakes decision making. Poise and tact complement intellectual courage.

Intellectual Empathy

Leaders who are able to think beyond their own life experience, surrendering to the perspective of others affected by the decision, undoubtedly enrich the quality of the decision. A simple exercise can produce this empathy. Ask the decision maker to identify an individual who will be affected by the decision. Once named, have the leader role-play—in first person—the decision receiver. Also in first person, have the leader respond to questions about the effects of the decision. The learning focus is to have the leader speak in first person, despite seeming awkward. The result is that the decision maker must use a different part of the brain to experience and have empathy related to the decision impact.

Intellectual Autonomy and Integrity

Autonomy implies that self-awareness of one's beliefs, values, and inferences has merit and will reflect in the quality of the decisions

made. It is closely linked to intellectual integrity, which allows leaders to use the wisdom and lessons learned from each life and leadership experience to recognize that truth evolves. Those who believed the world was flat held to intellectual autonomy, but would never have set sail for the New World were it not for the integrity to use the science of the day to comprehend the world as a globe, linked to the function of gravity. Critical thinking guided the risk to sail.

Intellectual Perseverance

In the midst of adversity, those who exercise critical thinking continue to use it. In times of a severe staffing shortage, it is hard to hold out for the right kind of hire rather than hiring someone for the sake of filling a staffing void.

Confidence in Reason

Some things are reasonable, logical, and follow a sequence. The leader, who is a critical thinker, relates to those things that make sense and trusts that instinct.

Fairmindedness

Critical thinking and decision making that evolves from what is equitable advances the reputation of being an authentic leader to self, others, the problem, and the context. Equitability differs from equality, in that an equitable decision ensures that the needs of all are considered. The idea of equality is that all are treated exactly the same, regardless of need. Decisions that emphasize equality are usually not fair minded.

CAN LEADERS BE TAUGHT CRITICAL THINKING?

In conclusion, the authors believe that all leaders have unique life and professional experiences that shape how they solve problems and take actions. Computer-aided decision

making is adding new dimensions to expose the probability or likelihood of decision alternatives. Expect that leaders will require new tools to aid them in their roles, especially when faced with highly complex situations.

But this is also known: the ability to analyze and learn from events can be examined in reflective case reviews. Doing so models self-direction and discipline and also supports self-corrective thinking. Learning activities can be designed and studied individually and in groups for the attributes noted earlier—clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth,

breath, logic, and fairness. Concept maps, brainstorming, and other techniques can tease out these attributes, opening new vistas for leaders to explore. The essential intellectual traits noted above can be points of 360-degree feedback, self-reflective journaling, and leadership coaching dialogue. A leadership coach or professional nurse educator can ask critical questions and pose reflective opportunities to strengthen autonomy, integrity, fairness, perseverance, and the other traits noted. In the end, leading on requires problem awareness, critical thinking, decision making, and action.

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