Critical Thinking

By Lesley Bowen

Everyone talks the talk...we need to think out of the box! But how do you motivate employees and give them the ability to actually perform that function? Don’t rely on a “lucky” one-time solution. How can employers engage employees in the processes essential to improving job functions, saving money, and improving working conditions? What can critical thinking do for your place of employment?

What is Critical Thinking?

In 1962 Robert H. Ennis published the “influential” article “A Concept of Critical Thinking” in the Harvard Educational Review in which he defined the critical thinking as “reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do.”

To elaborate on this definition Ennis developed “A Super-Streamlined Conception of Critical Thinking” (see side bar), a list of a dozen traits of the critical thinker, with emphasis upon reflection and open-mindedness. The critical thinker also strives to be well-informed and evaluates the credibility of sources and analyzes the quality of an argument. Ultimately, the critical thinker can take a position and/or offer more than one acceptable solution for a single scenario.

In no way is “critical” intended to infer faultfinding or imply anything negative. Rather “critical” is “exercising or involving careful judgement or judicious evaluation” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 11th edition, p. 296).

Critical Thinking Can Create a Win-Win Operation in the Workplace

When critical thinking is absent in the workplace, managers can encourage employees to exercise critical thinking using the strategies of Reflection, Reasons, and Alternatives (RRA). This can be self-taught or taught through training programs employers develop.

First, encourage employees to be Reflective, that is to think deliberately rather than reactively when evaluating a situation in need of solution(s). Consider the perspective of others before accepting information automatically, without thinking.

Next, pose questions like “How do you know?” or “What are the reasons?” or “Is that a good source of information?” to help employees move a step beyond in their thinking and have good Reasons for their views and to seek reasons for others’ views.

Then, consider Alternatives. These may be hypotheses, conclusions, explanations, sources of evidence, points of views, and so on. There can be more than one viable solution to a situation.

Incorporating the RRA Strategy as part of their thought processes, employees can perform better and enjoy more job satisfaction knowing they have contributed to workplace solutions and efficiencies.

A CRITICAL THINKER

Is open-minded and mindful of alternatives
Desires to be, and is, well-informed
Judges well the credibility of sources
Identifies reasons, assumptions, and conclusions
Asks appropriate clarifying questions
Judges well the quality of an argument, including its reasons, assumptions, evidence, and their degree of support for the conclusion
Can well develop and defend a reasonable position regarding a belief or an action, doing justice to challenges
Formulates plausible hypotheses
Plans and conducts experiments well
Defines terms in a way appropriate for the context
Draws conclusions when warranted – but with caution
Integrates all of the above aspects of critical thinking (Ennis)

These strategies are the first three which comprise “Twenty-One Strategies and Tactics for Teaching Critical Thinking” recommended by Ennis (Learn more at http://www.criticalthinking.net/howteach.html).

Benefits of Critical Thinking in a Laundry or Linen Distribution Setting

Consider some of the benefits of critical thinking in the general workplace, and they are just applicable in a laundry...
or linen distribution setting. This information is adapted from Arnold Anderson’s article on “Benefits of Critical Thinking In the Workplace” [http://smallbusiness.chron.com/benefits-critical-thinking-workplace-11638.html].

Generates Fresh Ideas

Rather than reacting and Designating an issue to a particular category, critical thinking allows managers and employees alike to look past the usual protocol and seek a fresh approach or a different method to solve problems efficiently. That is not to say, change for the sake of change, but to consider alternatives to the way something has been done previously.

Promotes Cooperative Effort

Critical thinking isn’t limited to just managers or just employees; it’s all inclusive and a cooperative effort. More brains can generate more solutions in the industrial laundry setting too. Where there is diversity, this cooperation allows these employees to develop solutions together. Everybody can contribute and have a say in what happens. “Critical thinking exercises promote workplace tolerance and can be used as part of diversity training.” (Anderson).

Offers Choices

Critical thinking encourages more than one solution to a situation. Laundries routinely offer a range of services (or solutions) to customers. While offering these solutions, laundries can come up with services that use resources on hand rather than buying new materials which delivers savings to both parties. Critical thinking provides more than just the same old answer.

Triggers Collateral Solutions

Examining the big picture when resolving a situation generates ideas that a laundry or linen service can apply to other workplace scenarios. For example, a critical thinking exercise about a stain removal process could lead to solutions to reduce linen replacement costs to the customer. Answering questions in one critical thinking exercise can lead to answers of unasked questions elsewhere.

In Conclusion

Critical thinking, like learning any new skill, takes practice to become proficient. Employers who invest the time to teach the RRA strategy in the workplace and encourage employees to practise critical thinking daily reap the benefit of having employees who are engaged in the processes essential to improving job functions, saving money, and improving working conditions.

Website Resources:

Anderson, Arnold
Link 1
Link 2

Ennis, R.H.
Link 1
Link 2

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