

Critical Thinking Interview-Part I

With Richard C. Wells (Rick), **BPI's** VP of R&D

What is critical thinking and how can it help us resolve difficult issues, make better decisions, and solve problems? Learn what a critical thinking expert has to say about all this in part one of a wide-ranging interview of Rick Wells. Rick has been teaching critical thinking at Fortune 500 companies in every industry for 35 years. He is the author of several books including, *The Right Choice-A Guide to Executive Decision Making; Critical Thinking for Leaders* and *Making A Difference*. In Part I of our interview, Wells dispels some of the myths about what it means to be a critical thinker.

BPI is a training company that specializes in critical thinking. What do you do? Do you teach people how to be critics?

Well, no. I suppose critics do apply their judgment to their chosen specialty area. But, a critic is not necessarily an accomplished critical thinker. An accomplished critical thinker is able to assess the logical demands of any situation and can meet these demands appropriately.

I've read that leaders from all levels of society are saying people need to be taught critical thinking. This includes students, employees, managers, and voters.

A thinking skill explosion has not accompanied the information explosion. Many people are overwhelmed with the variety and depth of information available. They need to be taught thinking strategies. People need to be able to determine what information they really need and in what order. The starting point for this is a big picture perspective. This helps clarify what information is needed, what to focus on first, and what information can safely be put aside for later or ignored altogether.

What is your definition of critical thinking?

We define critical thinking simply as thinking that involves the application of judgment. We have developed and refined a simple logical framework to teach people a purpose-driven evaluation process. It's all about the systematic application of one's own judgment.

Critical Thinking Interview-Part I

We tend to think of critical thinking as a cold or objective way of looking at things, but this is inaccurate. The reality is that each of us brings our own subjective experience of the world into any analysis and this is reflected in our judgments. What we want is for people to make the best possible use of their judgments. We provide a purpose driven logical structure, one that makes those judgments visible.

Is critical thinking taught at universities?

Yes, you can find a course entitled "critical thinking" at many colleges and universities. The course will usually be an elective and include such topics as deduction, inference, interpretation, recognition of assumptions and evaluation of argument. Typically what students learn are ways to label certain types of (poor) thinking. They learn how to identify and categorize logical fallacies and how these relate to philosophical analysis. Students are not likely to become better critical thinkers after this type of course because the emphasis is not on doing critical thinking. It is on studying the field of critical thinking, with some study of other people's critical thinking. So, the transfer to one's own life and work is just not made.

So, how do you make critical thinking more applicable to everyday life?

What people need is help making sense of the world as they see it. So when teaching critical thinking, the methods should apply to thinking about real life. In real life we are not given a set of facts in a nice neat package. We find facts buried with less objective information including opinions, generalizations and other people's conclusions. Therefore, what is taught should address this.

A further real life complication is that some of the facts we have are irrelevant, and many facts we'd like to have are missing or unavailable. And finally, rarely does life provide us with the luxury of facing just one issue at a time. We need to learn how to separate issues and then decide which to address first. In order to be truly useful, any new method for thinking critically must demonstrate how to work against these real-life constraints.

Critical Thinking Interview-Part I

Does being more rational mean being more complex?

Well, accomplished critical thinkers can handle more complexity than others can because they know what to focus on and what to ignore. Einstein once said, "Things should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler." Confusion and complexity are usually the result of a failure to meet the true needs of a situation. So, an accurate read on what is needed will keep things simple, or at least as simple as possible.

One reason people blunder is they end up in situations trying to use the wrong tool for the job. Either they are unclear about their purpose and select the wrong tool or a better tool is unknown to them. But, lacking the right tools, people often do a hatchet job using what they have. This makes things more complicated than they need to be.

Do you have an example of this?

The use of brainstorming is a good example. Many people have been taught to develop a list of problems using the brainstorming technique.

But brainstorming is a creativity tool and not designed to gather specific, factual information. Groups that start off brainstorming problems end up with a big list of opinions, solutions, blameful statements, generalizations, and conclusions, but not necessarily a list of specific problems. The brainstorming tool is simple. However, when it is used inappropriately, the result is a mess. Clarifying your purpose and understanding what is needed helps you to select the right tool for the job. For listing problems you want factual observations of reality and there are better tools than brainstorming to help you do that.

Using the right tool for the job just sounds like common sense. Isn't it common sense?

When someone is thinking well it should look and feel like just plain common sense. But, a purely spontaneous thinker can be overwhelmed with complexity, with too much information, with a lack of focus, with being diverted on tangents, and with the sheer randomness of their own thinking process. The trick is to allow your thinking to do

Critical Thinking Interview-Part I

what it does naturally and to recognize not only which ideas are valuable to your purpose but also how best to employ them. Training in this skill can provide the conscious awareness of a thinking framework used to navigate and guide thinking more effectively.

(To be continued ... [Go to Part II](#))

In Part II, Rick discusses critical thinking and its contribution to creative thinking, innovation and performance management.

[Critical Thinking For Leaders](#) (two days)

[Critical Thinking](#) (two days)

[Systematic Problem Solving](#) (one day)

[Systematic Decision Making](#) (one day)

[Systematic Project Management](#) (one day)