

Critical Thinking Interview-Part II

How does critical thinking relate to topics such as creativity, innovation, needs assessment, quality tools, and whole brain thinking? Learn what a critical thinking expert says about all these in Part II of our wide-ranging interview of Richard C. Wells, Vice President of **BPI** Research & Development.

I've heard you say that there are many myths about organizations and what ails them. What is one of these myths?

One myth is that the problem with organizations is that people are just too rational. We must think "outside the box" – to borrow the tired cliché – and learn how to be more creative.

And that's not true? Don't we need to be more creative?

Hold it. Let's start with the first statement that "people are just too rational." Does anyone really believe that people are too rational, that people use reason too much? I've never heard anyone complain that their boss or co-workers are "too rational!" Even if we did believe that people are too rational, keep in mind that the opposite of rationality is not creativity; it's irrationality. So, to fix this, the new shift would have to be towards irrationality which, of course, would be silly at best.

I think when people say organizations are "too rational" they really mean to say that they're being too narrow and shortsighted. For instance, perhaps decisions are being made based only on present-costs without taking into account other important factors, such as the effects on people or on long-term goals. But truly rational analysis would address all the factors necessary to make a good decision and provide a framework for creative thinking to flourish. So, my first recommendation is to teach people how to be more rational through **BPI's** Critical Thinking methods.

But I thought being critical is the last thing you need when trying to be more creative.

Critical thinking is not the same as being critical. We teach a rational framework to assess the big picture and to help determine what is needed to resolve issues. The use of the rational framework requires critical thinking. There is a place within the framework for the application of creative thought,

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but it is part of a rational system. So yes, technically, when you wish to focus on creative thought, judgment is suspended. However, judgment was used to clarify the issue, to define the real needs of the situation, and to avoid being too narrow. Judgment also will be used after creative thought to select and improve the best idea and to put together action plans. Critical thinking helps you navigate the rational framework and to use creative thinking when and where it is needed. Unstructured creative thought can go in any direction and may stray from your intended purpose.

So, it sounds like, in your view, rationality and creativity are complimentary?

Yes, our rational framework maps out where critical thinking and creative thinking are needed. We've achieved dramatic improvements in "creativity" simply by teaching people how to be better critical thinkers. Critical thinking complements creative thinking by helping to focus our attention and set the stage for insights and good ideas. In fact, it has been my experience that what people call a "lack of creativity" is due to a lack of critical thinking skill.

How could that be?

Well, picture this. A customer service manager sees that reps are repeating the same solution over and over in dealing with customer service problems. The manager knows that there are better solutions to these issues and wonders why the reps aren't thinking of them. After brief reflection the manager decides that the failure to think of different solutions is due to a lack of creative skill. The manager calls the training department and orders an emergency creativity training class.

This scenario pretty much describes how the need for creativity training is often determined. Observations are made that people are making poor decisions. This "obviously" means that people can't come up with any "better" ideas, so they must ... lack creativity. Poor decision making must mean lack of creativity. But this is not necessarily true. In fact, this is rarely true in my experience.

Poor decisions are usually due to poor thinking habits. People fail to determine what is really happening, fail to

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determine what decision needs to be made, fail to determine who should be involved, fail to define all critical needs, and fail to develop ideas. Once people are made more consciously aware of their thinking processes, they use their existing creativity skills much better. It's a matter of clarifying the situation before trying to develop a solution.

You've said before that training departments will often prescribe a training solution without first understanding the real need, like what you just described. Could you talk more about that?

Okay. A similar error occurs when training departments do a needs assessment to determine what training to provide for the organization. Now, there is nothing wrong with a needs assessment, at least in theory. You should know the real need before inflicting a solution on someone. But a so-called 'needs assessment' often isn't.

A real needs assessment would establish concerns – what specifically is happening and why. Then, based on this knowledge, solutions could be developed to meet these needs. Solutions could range from process changes, to modification of incentives, to training. But, what training departments often do for a "needs" assessment is a "what-training-do-you-think-you need" assessment. This is a very different thing from a needs assessment. A real needs assessment requires use of critical thinking to make a systematic evaluation of the performance situation.

Of course, I think I know why training managers do their needs assessments this way. If management asks for training and you give them that training, then you are responsive and supportive. The risk that the training might be a poor use of time and money is regrettable but that is not their primary focus. I think I am right about this because training managers rarely insist on a proper evaluation of the impact of the training on their organization's performance. They tend to stick to level one evaluations from participants and don't show much interest in results we document from working on participant issues in the workshops. They don't require working with management to follow up ideas and analysis generated in class to document ROI, for example.

What about the use of performance management specialists to address needs?

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Performance management as a specialty seeks to determine the real needs of any performance situation and match the solution to those needs. Knowledge of the critical thinking skills I am suggesting would complement a performance management specialist's background by making their assessments more time effective and simple.

In what way?

For one, the mastery of the critical thinking framework would allow the performance consultant to quickly locate the most likely cause of performance problems based on information gathered using just a few questions. This is possible because the performance expert already knows the universe of potential causes of performance problems. What they need is a quick way to logically eliminate (scrub) general possibilities and focus on the few that fit the present situation. Then, when they go out to gather more information, they can zero in on just the information they need. The usual performance analysis gathers information from the entire situation. This is seldom necessary. It wastes time and is much more intrusive than it needs to be.

The other issue I have with performance analysis is that it is biased away from what works in reality and towards what the expert believes the ideal performance situation should look like.

What's wrong with that?

Whenever you're evaluating a performance issue, you want to first understand how the present situation developed, then you can devise a specific action to improve it. But, if you just compare the present situation to the ideal you will create a long list of deviations from the ideal. One or more of these deviations may be responsible for the present performance levels, but maybe not.

Any strategy that relies on comparing every element of a situation to an expert's list of ideal conditions will take a relatively long time for analysis and result in logical errors and mistakes. The assumption is that the optimum way to improve the present situation is to eliminate all deviations from what is thought to be ideal by performance experts. Some people might call this arrogance but I would characterize it as poor thinking.

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Is creative thinking the same as innovation?

The term "innovation" is now being used several ways. Specialists in creativity have recognized that being creative is only part of the story, that teaching people to use a creativity tool is not enough. They use the term "innovation process" to describe a series of steps. Some of these steps go before and some after the creative thinking step. Also, an "innovation" is a label now given to an idea after it has been successfully implemented. So, the term means real significant positive change. Creativity is a skill. The innovation process uses creativity to help produce positive results.

Where does critical thinking fit in with innovation?

A typical innovation process is as follows:

1. Define the present need
2. Develop ideas
3. Choose a course of action
4. Develop an implementation plan
5. Try the idea and evaluate results

Taken together the steps of the innovation process form a rational framework. Only one step in the five step process can be characterized as creative (2.). The rest of the steps require significant aspects of critical thinking. For example, one must apply critical thinking principles to define the present need. If this is not done (or not done accurately) the rest of the process risks being virtually useless or worse. On the other hand, once the need has been clearly and accurately defined, coming up with ideas about what to do is much easier.

So, critical thinking helps innovation?

Yes. Innovation requires critical thinking. You use critical thinking anywhere the application of judgment is required to accomplish some valued set of outcomes.

What about the process improvement efforts, what is the relationship of critical thinking to these continuous improvement efforts?

The tool bag can contain hundreds of very specialized tools including data collection/data organizing tools, statistical tools, and low-level creativity tools. The tool box is missing

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general purpose tools specifically designed to do critical thinking and enable a group of people to think effectively, together.

To conclude, is there any other point you'd like to make?

I'd like to ask a few questions. There has been much research concerning right brain and left brain thinking. I am sure that the two halves of our brain were designed to work together, each contributing to overall success. I've read split-brain articles which say western thought is too linear (left brain.) But, what seems to be natural for many people is to rush ahead without a clear understanding of where they are or where they are going. This rush from the unclear toward the undefined can be disastrous. It is not left brain thinking or right brain thinking, is it? More like non-thinking.

Someone awakens one morning with a great idea resolving an issue they have been struggling with for many weeks. The idea feels right and it fits the demands of reality perfectly. Some experts would say that this occurs because the left brain has relaxed its grip on the right during sleep allowing the breakthrough. But, what if the only things relaxed were the irrational constraints, the inaccurate assumptions, the blocks to processing information, the emotional flooding? In short, what if our unconscious mind has been made free from irrationality and can process information enough to produce a clear picture of reality and a simple solution to it? Sure, when the solution is completed it is a "picture." But, getting there required information processing, too. After all, doesn't a proper solution always look simple in hindsight? Like the view from the top of the mountain looking down, after you arrive it is clear how to get there. Why is that? Maybe the brain is like a photo lab with critical thinking serving to help the brain develop the whole picture.

This fits my experience in working with people tackling complex issues. Helping people to accurately assess their present situation, feeds their excitement and their creative juices and their ability to create new big picture insights. It looks to me as if the claim that as a culture we are too half-brained should be reassessed. What if the apparent lack of

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right brain power is due to a general weakness in left brain processing skills? Our insight depends, in part, on our power of analysis. After all, if you see constraints where there are no constraints, if you make assumptions that are not valid, if you fail to organize information relevant to your purpose and so forth, your analytical skills are suspect. Eliminating these constraints should boost your ability to develop new and appropriate solutions (creativity) to the issues you care about.

At least it is something to think about.

Indeed.

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