Critical Thinking Interview (update)

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

INTERVIEW: Rick Wells
Vice President R & D
BUSINESS PROCESSES INC.
www.critical-thinking.com
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What is critical thinking? **Do you teach people how to be critics?**

No. We define "*critical thinking*" as the systematic application of judgment to assess a situation's logical needs and how to meet those needs using a rational, purpose driven thinking process.

Leaders in education and business want students and employees to learn HOW to think not WHAT to think, any recommendations?

First, I don't recall ever being taught **HOW** to think as a separate set of lessons or courses in the schools I attended. Except for basic mathematics and the scientific method, I learned no thinking approach that transferred easily to how I needed to think in other classes or in my life generally.

What can you recommend for a class to teach HOW to think?

Fortunately, there was no need to recreate the wheel. Research into exceptional problem solvers and decision makers (late 50's) revealed a common approach among these practical thinkers. We now know that a complete framework requires four independent thinking elements. Researchers had defined two of the elements more or less completely if academically. So, when two of the researchers started their own company, they carried over that focus (60's). No matter. BPI became a competitor (late 70's) and through hundreds of coaching sessions with customers learned how to fill out and streamline the four-element framework – transforming an academic process into a practical, time effective tool useful throughout all industry categories.

So, now there is a robust four-process thinking framework that can be learned by teams in a two-day workshop. This is all about HOW to think - adapting to the unique demands of the current situation. This approach has proven to be easy to teach, easy to learn, and unique because it employs both a rapidly convergent problem-solving thinking process and convergent decision-making process.

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Can you sketch some details about this framework?

Yes, to begin, unlike the classroom, life rarely presents issues neatly packaged. Instead, both the relevant and irrelevant bits are mixed with facts, conjecture, opinions, worries, and advice. Therefore, **Concern Analysis** is the first thinking process. Its purpose is to quickly separate and prioritize the issues.

What other tools?

Some issues may be problems (i.e., unwanted outcomes). One or more of these problems may have consequences that need containment. If so, the **Decision-Making** process is used to develop the best containment approach. **Problem Solving** is used to converge on the true cause of each problem. Understanding true cause supports creation of the best Corrective Action. After the Corrective action is approved, the **Planning** process lays out the steps for implementing that change.

How does Root Cause Analysis fit into this?

The Problem-Solving tool is used to Track Root Cause. We've found that knowing Root Cause is usually not valued as much as it should be. This is most unfortunate. Fully understanding how problems are created offers a valuable creativity opportunity for improving policies, procedures, and systems. This can make the organization more competitive and resilient. Perhaps frontline management lacks incentives to bullet-proof these processes. Knowing root cause can be used to cut problem loads in the future.

How about The Five-Whys?

Yes, we use a modified Five-Whys procedure for tracking root cause. The standard **Five-Whys** lacks our convergent analysis for answering the question "Why?". Teams often identify what they think is "Why?". But, without analysis. So, this may become just the **Five-Guesses**. See the video POST (LinkedIn/in/rick-wells): "**Tracking Root Cause**" about four flaws in the Five-Whys tool as identified by an upper-level Toyota exec. Also, go to our website (critical-thinking.com) for related articles. One Article in our members section (free) discusses our evaluation of the 3 Legged 5 Whys (#27).

So, the selection of a team tool can create problems?

Correct. People often use the wrong tool. Either they are unclear about their purpose, or a better tool is unknown to them. But people use what they have and are familiar with. This can make things complicated. For example, brainstorming tools were originated as part of decision making for the generation of creative ideas for marketing products. But this is not the issue in Problem Solving where what we want is precisely what caused the problem. There is no value in thinking of other ways to create the problem beyond finding what happened.

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What advice can you offer to an organization who wants to improve team collaboration efforts?

The biggest gumption trap is poor tools!
– from Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.

DO's: First, be sure the teams have thinking tools that fit their responsibilities.

1) Resolving problems will require both Problem-Solving, and Decision-Making collaboration tools w/ a practical way to do analysis.

2) New information may be required. Use tools to design experiments to confirm and reveal causes or to optimize combinations of factors in solutions.

3) Creative Solutions will benefit from a Decision-Making process based upon knowledge learned from 1) and 2) above.

4) If they must implement decisions, a simple Planning process is useful.

5) Any of these can meet Reporting responsibilities as required by management.

DON'Ts:

1) Hide information from the team to foster the illusion of being brilliant and indispensable.

2) Support selfish agendas of the team or management.

3) Use inadequate thinking tools, ones with missing parts (e.g. 5-Whys or Fishbone diagrams have no analysis.)

4) Use unnecessarily complicated tools that create weeks of delays and waste resources.

(To be continued …)

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

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