

MOVING FROM TRANCE TO THINK: WHY WE NEED TO POLISH OUR CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

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Critical thinking is a crucial prerequisite for responsible human performance not only in organizations, but also in every area of life. Yet, this quality is often downplayed, which is reflected in high numbers of disgruntled working adults. Dissatisfied workforce members are often only partly aware of the reasons for their dissatisfaction, which may be linked to sparse critical thinking about their purpose in life. Critical thinking enables a broader perspective and the ability to rise beyond standardized thought patterns. This ability leads to creative breakthroughs regarding directions and activities that fulfill personal and societal needs of longitudinal meaning, motivation, performance improvement, and general wellbeing. As a think-piece for the second decade of the 21st century, this article provides an overview of some important factors that prevent critical thinking, captured in the telling acronym “TRANCE,” and some important actions that enhance critical thinking, represented in the equally divulging term “THINK.” The article also discusses the specific parts of TRANCE that are addressed as one begins practicing specific elements of THINK.

One of the advantages of having been exposed to multiple cultures is that you can see how people in one place take things for granted or settle for limitations that are entirely unacceptable in another. Intrigued by this notion, I engaged in deeper contemplation on the topic of critical thinking. I became aware of the fact that many people dwell in miserable situations because they have never learned to critically evaluate their options and the possible solutions that could improve the quality of their lives. Nevertheless, critical thinking has become a survival skill in the rapidly changing world of today. This article reviews the essence of critical thinking from a personal development perspective, assuming that personal development lies at the core of any other development. After a brief literature review, I will present some important impediments and supporting factors of critical thinking. I will end with a brief overview of the constructive cycle that can be established when critical thinking becomes embedded in one’s performance.

Why We Need Critical Thinking

Critical thinking has been defined in many ways, oftentimes depending on the focus being considered. Hobaugh (2010) presented a definition for critical thinking, formulated by The American Philosophical Association: “We understand critical thinking to be purposeful, self-regulatory judgment that results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based” (p. 48).

Hobaugh (2010) underscored that, in order to instill critical thinking, there should first be proper understanding that it involves the quality of thinking and not, as is often claimed, mere decision-making, creative thinking, intuitive thinking, problem-solving, brainstorming, or out-of-the-box thinking. Cotter and Tally (2009) clarified that critical thinking should entail the evaluation of information sources, the act of challenging assumptions, the skill of context understanding, the ability to analyze arguments, and the readiness to use metacognition. Natale and Ricci (2006) drew the conclusion that critical thinking is crucial for organizational advancement. They recommended that organizational teams consist of members with different perspectives yet with the ability to collaborate and achieve healthy consensus. Schott Karr (2009) stressed that critical thinking largely replaces technical knowledge in workplaces today, which makes it more essential than ever. Sawin (2004) opined that critical thinking is also essential for personal progress: “To increase our coping ability we need critical thinking skills to cultivate flexibility and creativity in our decision making and problem solving” (p. 240).

In education, the value of critical thinking has also been proven. Savich (2008) conducted a comparison study between two high school history student groups. One group received its course through the traditional lecturing method, while the other was exposed to a creative inquiry method. While the study indicated that lectures were effective for background and introduction, it was copiously demonstrated that critical thinking skills were more effective in achieving in-depth understanding of the topic, while proper integration between the critical thinking skills and subject content, as well as students’ general motivation increased. Noblitt, Vance, and Smith (2010) found that students in a junior forensic science course consistently performed better when they were allowed to present case studies that required critical thinking, as opposed to the traditional paper presentations.

Would Most People Rather Die than Think?

Unfortunately, critical thinking has not been emphasized sufficiently in past decades. Perhaps the need was not as critical as it has become. Bertrand Russell once stated, “Most people rather die than think – in fact most do.” Russell, who died in 1970, came to his conclusion in a time when the pace of life was slower than it is today, and he was not even referring to critical thinking – just thinking. Forty years after Russell’s passing, we can establish that many people still suffer from the same problem: they don’t think to an extent where they really question their status quo and consider their options beyond certain limitations. This, then, is the root of all progress impediments, which explains why more than half of the working population in leading nations such as the U.S. and the U.K. are dissatisfied. People are trapped by limitations that they have allowed to be erected around them.

In a 2010 Huffington Post article, Pattakos contemplated how much people can learn from a fly that keeps buzzing and banging against the closed window—he wants to go out into

the light, but doesn't have the awareness to try other windows or doors. Pattakos (2010) stated that, unlike flies, we humans can think and evaluate our circumstances and thus plan toward improvement. But how many of us really do that? Sawin (2004) made the pointed remark that birds are better at being birds than humans at being human because birds do what birds are supposed to do, from building their nests and feeding their chicks to promoting survival of their species, but human beings, with all their capacities and knowledge toward constructive and survival oriented behavior, cannot seem to figure out how to live successfully and rationally on a massive scale.

In line with Sawin's notions, I agree with Pattakos' (2010) assertion that in spite of our ability to think, we humans are dealing with two major problems that often keep us from thinking critically: fear and misconception.

- Fear inhibits the courage to deviate from a familiar path and try new avenues, especially if those are in unknown territory.
- Misconception makes us think that we think critically while we remain within pre-set boundaries, determined by our culture or environment. As a result, we only consider options that fit within "acceptable" cultural, habitual, religious, psychological, or emotional boundaries. Consequently, we may explore the "windows" in one room, but fail to try windows and doors in other rooms.

TRANCE: The Sleepwalkers' Cluster

At this point, it might be useful to take a step back since many people do not even make it to the dimension where horizon expansion comes into play. While they do use their minds, many simply do so with regard to issues that will refrain from rocking their cradle of comfort. They prefer to "sleepwalk," or they perform as if they are in trance. When one is in trance, one follows orders without thinking. Trance is, therefore, the most important opponent to critical thinking, and it consists of at least six elements.

Tradition. Tradition is captured in one's culture and in the social habits one has acquired over years. It may be possible that certain inadequate traditions once made sense, but much has changed and they gradually became outdated. Such traditions may even hinder progress. However, there may be too much at stake to consider changing these traditions or habits. We may worry about what others might say if we would explore new avenues that may be "off-limits" in our community. We may even find loved ones discourage us from exploring these alternatives because they may fear that we will fail, change too much, or leave them behind; so they will make efforts to have us explore only certain windows and avoid others. Critical thinking is perceived differently in different cultures. Lun, Fisher, and Ward (2010) conducted a study as a result of the general concern expressed by Western college professors that their international Asian students are less apt in critical thinking. The authors found that the Asian students may have more of a cognitive problem than a reduced degree of critical thinking. Yet, McGuire (2007) contradicted this assertion by positing that the critical thinking movement has failed to enter Korea thus far, and Davidson (2002) deliberated different ways to make critical thinking useful in Japan, thereby affirming that "Objections to bringing critical thinking to Japan are usually based on the view that critical thinking is a Western cultural attribute unsuited to Asia" (p. 39).

Religion. Religion in and of itself should be given credit for keeping order in some societies. However, many contemporary religions were not established as peacefully as they

proclaim to be today. Moreover, they are stranded in patterns that are grave misinterpretations of what their “founders” intended. Most major religions were inspired by highly awakened people who were not members of the religious group because it was founded long after their passing. The people who actually founded the congregations were often times not as awakened as their role models, so they set rules and created confinements to keep order and to refrain from losing control. Paul and Elder (2009) described the limitations that religion can bring: “Religious beliefs, when dominant in a human group, tend to shape many, if not all, aspects of a person's life with rules, requirements, taboos, and rituals” (p. 40). Analyzing the philosophy behind this limiting trend, Paul and Elder continued, “Most of these regulations have no ethical force beyond the members of one group. In fact, they are, in themselves, neither right nor wrong, but simply represent social preferences and culturally subjective choices” (p. 40).

Anxiety. Anxiety is a result of both tradition and religion. People who belong to certain cultural or religious groups, especially if these groups are stern and rigid, often do not dare to step out to follow their individual purposes. Fear is either naturally in them or instilled by others. Anxiety is, however, a much more encompassing factor than simply fear of failure or lost loved ones. Fear can also be instigated by lack of self-confidence, unfamiliarity with changed circumstances, loss of something that is considered precious, such as comfort, income, status, or friends. Anxiety is a proven and often discussed element in resistance to change, aversion to thinking, and descending in trance. Whisner (1993) agreed that many people are afraid to face present or future discomfort and therefore start rationalizing their fate and engaging in self-deception.

Negligence. Negligence often manifests itself in people who prefer the easy way out. They have allowed themselves to become lethargic. They choose non-challenging activities and gradually become more aloof, uncaring about changes around them, and set in their easy ways, even when dissatisfied. Weiler (2005) presented the findings of a study among college students, which revealed that Generation Y students who have grown up in front of television and computer have developed an aversion for reading and lack critical thinking skills. These students often lack strong viewpoints and have little they can relate to, and they are dreadfully unfamiliar with research methods and resources (Weiler).

Conventionalism. Conventionalism, or conformism, is oftentimes a consequence of anxiety toward change and/or longitudinal negligence. People who cling to conventional ways and things will not encourage new developments nor question their established activities. In an article on Muhammad Yunus, the only business-person who has won a Nobel Peace Prize, Loveland (2009) presented an example of the dulling that occurs in critical reasoning when people mindlessly cling to conventional approaches. Yunus set out to end poverty in Bangladesh by trying to help poor laborers in the streets escape the stranglehold from moneylenders. Unfortunately, no conventional bank wanted to provide these people a loan. They clung to the conventional belief that poor people don't pay their loans. Yunus ultimately started Grameen Bank, proving the conventional banks wrong and becoming highly successful through the courage to question the status quo, think critically, and correct something that was wrong.

Excessive focus on left brain activities. Excessive focus on left-brain activities is a very difficult problem to overcome because it is embedded in our modern civilization. Throughout formal education we have been taught to focus on abstract matters and stay away from the creative (right-brain) activities. We look up to the first and down on the last. As a result, our creative skills have been reduced, since childhood, to a super-meager level that requires personal intervention in order to tap into the well of creativity (drawing, dancing, art, writing) again.

Robinson (2009) provided numerous examples of people who, against all odds, made it big in life through their creative, artistic, or other right brain skills in a world where abstract (left brain) thinking and a high emphasis on numbers still reigns. Similarly, Pink (2005) explained the difference in easy terms. The left part of our brain is where language is understood; this part has been prioritized because language is considered the skill that separates humans from other species (Pink). Although the right hemisphere was long considered inferior, it was gradually discovered to be crucial in holistic reasoning, pattern recognition, emotion, and non-verbal interpretations (Pink). Both Robinson and Pink made a strong argument for the importance of right brain thinking in the near future.

THINK: the Path toward Increased Critical Thinking

The 21st century has presented us with a broad package of developments, some wonderful and others scary, but all intended to make us realize that we need to change our tune. The entire mindset about what is considered “mainstream” today is changing. More and more organizations understand the advantage of involving people and allowing them to bring their creative thought to the table. Innovation is no longer the CEO’s or even the manager’s responsibility. In the most successful corporations, such as Google, Atlassian, Wholefoods, IKEA, and Southwest Airlines, to name just a few, it’s the creative input of the frontline employee that counts. But how can you start engaging in critical thinking if you have been moving in TRANCE so far? The answer is easy, but the implementation will take some more time: snap out of it! THINK!

To engage in increased critical thinking, these are some of the areas to seriously explore:

- **Traveling:** in order to break the TRANCE elements of Tradition, Anxiety, and Conventionalism, you will have to open yourself to different impressions—expose yourself to different places, read different books, and talk to different people. You will see and hear entirely different things than the ones you used to take for granted in your established world and become aware of the narrow-mindedness caused by these three factors.
- **Holism:** in order to break the TRANCE elements of Negligence, Conventionalism, and Excessive focus on left brain thinking, you will have to pick up an old creative activity that you buried long ago. What did you like in earlier, simpler years? Drawing? Painting? Puzzling? Sculpting? Do-it-yourself? Reading or writing poetry? Dancing? Create some time again to engage in this creative expression. It is more important than you think. Many leaders today realize that succeeding depends more on thinking creatively, and setting new, constructive trends, is far more important and rewarding than continuously counting the numbers.
- **Investigation:** in order to break the TRANCE elements of Tradition, obsessive Religion, and Conventionalism, you will have to engage in some serious self-reflection: where do your habits and mindsets come from? Why exactly are you holding on to them? How many of them are based on obsolete patterns? What is at stake if you release them? How are they limiting your progress in life? You will be better able to reflect on these issues if you have started to expose yourself to other environments, books, and people (see Traveling above).
- **Nexus:** Breaking the TRANCE elements of Tradition, Anxiety, Negligence, and Conventionalism, will require you to connect with broader and different oriented

audiences on a regular base. The 21st century has brought us Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter, and numerous other ways of communicating with people from all over the globe. We can now access newspapers and blogs from everywhere and read them. Through these “other” sources, we can expand our horizons and are no longer limited in accepting information and tendencies from local or national sources. If you use the Net in a more constructive fashion, it can become a valuable source in helping you develop critical thinking skills.

- **Kindle:** In order to break all of the TRANCE elements, Tradition, obsessive Religion, Anxiety, Negligence, Conventionalism, and Excessive focus on abstract thinking, you will have to awaken! You will have to deviate from mind-numbing activities, and gravitate toward mind-challenging activities. All of the 4 previous elements, Traveling, Holism, Investigation, and Nexus, are crucial in order to get yourself into mental and physical action again and ignite a fire inside.

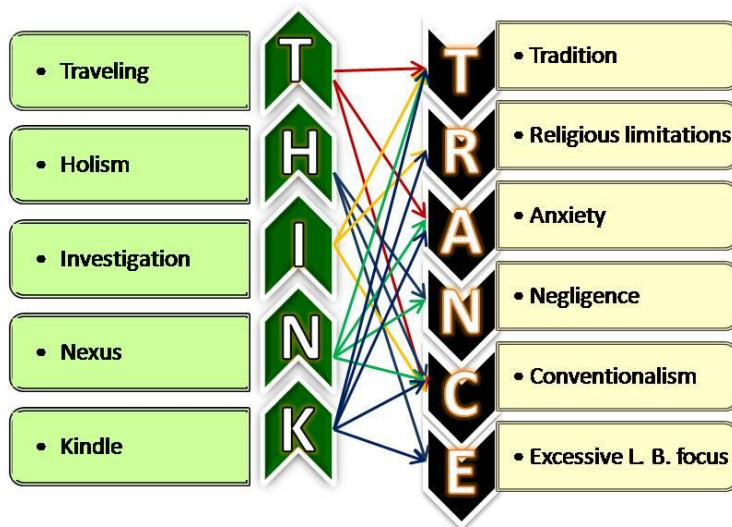


Figure 1. Trance-Think.

You can only start formulating your purpose if you teach yourself how to think about it. You cannot get far with thinking if you remain in TRANCE mode. But then again, it's up to you to decide. However, rest assured that once THINK has replaced TRANCE, you'll wonder how you ever allowed yourself to be buried alive, and ensure that you never again fall into the trap of TRANCE.

Critical Thinking toward Performance Improvement and General Wellbeing

There are various approaches that are designed to represent or enhance critical thinking in work settings. One of the better known strategies is the five why approach, where a person needs to ask “why?” five times in order to get to the root of an issue. However, Ayad (2010) criticized this strategy and presented some interesting examples that demonstrate how the five why approach does not always result in a sensible outcome or useful insight. Ayad therefore suggested an additional step, which entails deeper and more reflective questioning about the issue at hand. Ayad argued one should consider (a) the exact issue, (b) the reasons, (c) ambiguous parts of the issue, (d) possible conflicts or assumptions, examination of the reasoning

used so far to find out if there are any flaws, (e) potential rival causes that underlie the issue, (f) possible omission of critical information, and (g) possible conclusions to be drawn.

Regardless of whether you rely on quick fixes to enhance your critical thinking abilities or decide to seriously consider the suggestions provided in this article, critical thinking is something we cannot ignore any longer. People who engage in critical thinking acquire a broader perspective, which enables them to see more options than those who stick to conventional patterns. Due to this broader perspective, critical thinkers can rise beyond the modes of thinking they have held thus far. As they do so, their creative insights increase and they start considering options they had previously failed to address because they were not aware of them or considered them “taboo.” Yet, because they are now able to access multiple paths on their way to progress, these critical thinkers attain greater fulfillment of their personal needs and, oftentimes simultaneously, societal needs as well. By expanding their mental horizons, critical thinkers thus obtain meaning, find their performance improving (because they now do what they really want and not what is dictated to them), and contribute to the development of society; a society where performance is high is usually a rapidly progressing one. See Figure 2 for a visual depiction of the positive cycle of critical thinking.

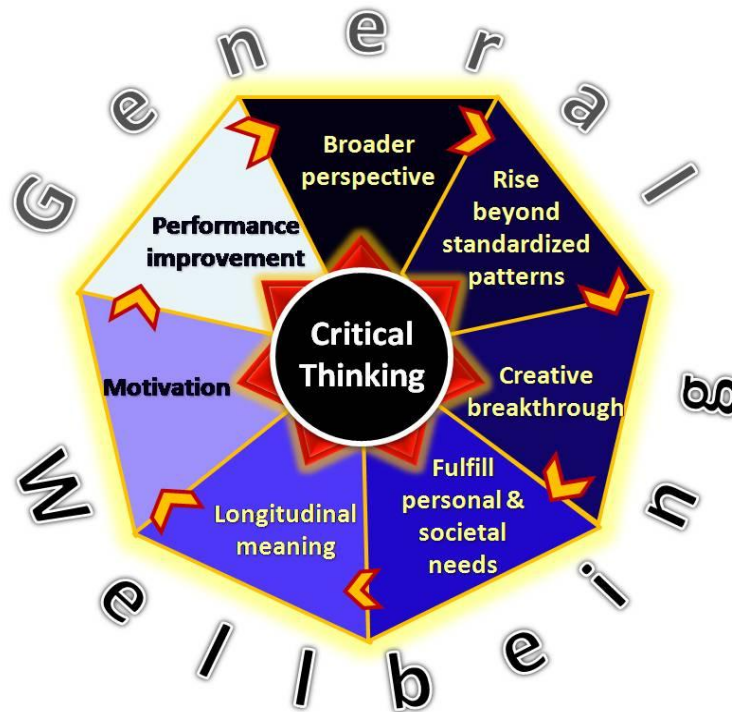


Figure 2. The constructive cycle of critical thinking.

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