

Critically Balanced Thinking for Leaders and Managers

In the fast-paced world we live in, how often do we take decisions without really thinking critically? How often do we find leaders and managers - and ourselves - constrained by their/our biases and assumptions?

The challenge has not been a lack of interest or even effort but rather the lack of an effective method to address the many contradictions and frustrations that stand in the way of thinking critically. Help is now at hand !

The IFRAME process is a new and useful tool enabling leaders and managers to untangle the perceived complexity of critical thinking, and provides a practical framework to address the many challenges in today's demanding work environments. It enables us to explore our long-held assumptions, bring our thoughts into focus and analyse them, and provides an opportunity to re-think the way we think and achieve more desirable outcomes.

It is a simple and easy-to-use six step model that guides us through the critical thinking process. Each step represents a milestone in the journey to becoming critically self-aware - to see the link between assumptions and the quality of the decisions we make.

The IFRAME Critical Thinking Process

		What do I do?	What happens next?
I	Incident	I <i>pay attention</i> to an inciting incident that happens to me or that I trigger on my own	An <i>inciting incident</i> significantly upsets the balance of forces in my life
F	Feelings	I have an <i>emotional reaction</i> to the incident, either positive or negative	I experience a <i>physical, mental, or spiritual reaction</i> to what has happened
R	Reflection	I ask myself and others <i>probing questions</i> to understand my response to the incident more fully	I get to the bottom of <i>where</i> my assumptions, biases, and reactions are <i>coming from</i>
A	Assumptions	I <i>bring my assumptions about the incident to the surface</i> to verify their validity and analyse their consequences	I get honest with myself and <i>look for trends and patterns</i> in my biases and assumptions
M	Meaning	I <i>interpret the meaning</i> and apply this heightened awareness to new or existing incidents in my work and personal life	I <i>challenge my assumptions</i> and explore new ways of thinking about the incident
E	Execution	I <i>formalise the process</i> with action planning so that I can apply it to future incidents	I <i>implement</i> a disciplined strategy to achieve new critical thinking outcomes

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Here is a simple example.

Step 1 - Incident: *An Inciting Incident occurs where you are surprised, curious, confused, unable to reach a resolution, and stop to pay attention to the event and your response*

During a management workshop, Brian is a member of a four-person team, experiencing hands-on a computer-based business simulation to practise applying the learning of the workshop. He notices that one member of the team is not participating in the discussions and is not responding to invitations for their input.

Step 2 - Feeling: *A feeling is an emotional response or triggers that allow the surfacing of inner thoughts or discourse.*

Brian feels uncomfortable and nonplussed, and that the team member may be resistant to this type of learning.

Step 3 - Reflection: *Reflection allows us to explore our individual response to an incident, to identify the limits in our views, through self analysis and questioning.*

Q: What is making me uncomfortable?

A: The silence and lack of interest

Q: What might be behind the lack of participation ?

A: Team member's understanding of the simulation and its usefulness.

Q: What reactions did I expect?

A: I expected enthusiasm for this action learning, and did not expect them not to participate

Q: What is making the individual reluctant to respond ?

A: Team members can be unpredictable

Step 4 - Assumptions: *The process of bringing our biases and assumptions to the forefront of our minds using incisive questions, leads to heightened awareness and level of reflection.*

Identify common themes in answer to reflective questions -

disappointment in lack of participation, discomfort with silence, who has power

Identify assumptive thinking by asking Incisive Questions

- If I knew I would be disappointed, how would I have responded?

- If I was aware of my discomfort with silence, what should I have done?

- If I had known who holds power in the discussions, what did I need to do to use that power in my favour?

What are the assumptions that I am prone to believe?

- People should respond vocally in a team discussion

- Power resides in anticipating what people will do

- Silence is awkward

- Lack of understanding can breed resistance

Step 5 - Meaning: *Interpreting the meaning enables us to explore its consequences.*

What are the consequences of my assumptions?

- The team member has a choice whether to respond or not, despite my discomfort
- Power is difficult to manage
- Silence can have advantages

What are the consequences to myself?

- I need to relax and not be so disturbed
- A team member may have good reasons for their lack of response
- I need to consider better stakeholder assessment to manage power
- I need to allow silence to prevail at times

Step 6 - Execution: *A continuous pattern of inquiry helps us monitor how our assumptions are taking shape in our daily lives, and supports the new level of critical consciousness.*

Brian should develop an action plan

- What must change?
- What must be created?
- What must stop?
- Who must he engage with to make this happen?

This step-by-step approach enables us to bring objectivity and balance to the critical thinking process by allowing past experiences help shape a new future.

To manage the Critical Thinking IFRAME process effectively there are three basic skills that come into play : Collaborative Inquiry, Interpersonal Communication, and Language & Linguistics.

- **Collaborative Inquiry** is about fostering an environment that supports critical thinking, critical consciousness and critical self-reflection. In pursuing collaborative inquiry there are three essential tasks :
 1. Develop relationships, both inside and outside the organisation, that support the exploration of our ideas and beliefs. These help us to look more closely at our actions and reactions, leading to more effective decision-making. The following should be borne in mind in such relationships -
 - practise empathetic listening ; show respect ; share information and ideas ;
 - maintain a sense of place ; consider mutuality ; celebrate diversity ; take ownership of your reactions ; give constructive feedback
 2. Foster relationships so we can scrutinise the impact that our assumptions are having on our actions and decision-making, to help us examine our critical consciousness.
 3. Seek out environments and relationships that let us test drive new ideas and assumptions, where we can delve into some critical self-reflection.

When using the model, conversations may seem awkward or uncomfortable to begin with, and we may become defensive, rendering messages somewhat ineffective. When this happens, using a variety of questioning techniques helps us move the discussions forward in a more positive manner.

- **Interpersonal Communication** is about understanding and practising different styles of communication, effective and varied questioning, and interactive listening.

The ability to listen and demonstrate we have heard by reflecting or paraphrasing is an important skill when using the IFRAME. However, sometimes thoughts and feelings may not be clear, so we may need to clarify what has been said. Questioning is at the core of this process. It provides an opportunity for us to explore the thinking and feelings that inform our taken-for-granted assumptions. Questioning supports collaborative inquiry by providing opportunities for feedback.

- **Language & Linguistics** encompass NLP and how we 'represent' the world in language. Conversing critically implies openness to rethink our assumptions and subject them to continuous questioning, feedback and exploration of ideas. Our interactions bring into awareness the different linguistic, cultural and philosophical traditions that may help or hinder our choices and actions. To become more adept at using the IFRAME process implies being open-minded, flexible, and willing to enter into interactions without pre-judgment.

The implications for leaders and managers are significant. The leader or manager who takes the time to analyse the impact that language and linguistics have on their interactions, benefits from additional choices in decision-making.

Critical thinking is also at the core of emotional intelligence - our emotions do not operate in isolation of our rational or critical thinking. Leaders and managers with emotional intelligence typically demonstrate five key personal capabilities and behaviours : self-awareness, curiosity, motivation, empathy, conscientiousness. So, we can view emotionally intelligent managers as those who are motivated to apply a degree of sensitivity, reason and curiosity to an emotionally charged incident or experience. The IFRAME can serve as an important link between our thoughts and our emotions - as a roadmap to help the emotionally intelligent individual.

I have found the IFRAME a useful tool in developing leaders and managers. During leadership development programmes, and individual coaching sessions, clients find it helps them really improve their critical thinking and decision-making. It is a helpful addition to the toolbox of all leaders, managers, training facilitators and coaches. If you would like a free critical thinking worksheet based on the IFRAME framework, please contact me on paula.hart@hrc-group.com . The IFRAME was developed by Lorne Kelton, M.Ed, and Shawn Ireland, Ed.D, and more information can be found at www.go-iframe.com/book.html .

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