



Eight Barriers to Successful Critical Thinking

Could barriers to successful critical thinking be preventing you from making more effective and innovative decisions, especially as a manager?

All too often we fall prey to patterns of thought that are comfortable to us without analyzing their effectiveness. When this happens we may not get the desired results because we haven't asked the right questions or asked enough of them to arrive at the best response to a problem.

Researchers and management specialists have identified more than 100 different barriers that prevent effective critical thinking, but there are eight roadblocks that all executives should burn into their memory. To help remember these eight, here is an acronym for them – **CAT MAGIC**.

1. CONFIRMATION BIAS – bending evidence to fit one's beliefs. How many times do executives look for information that supports their point of view as opposed to seeking evidence that is individually or group "neutral?" "The best way to fight this natural temptation of confirmation bias is to actively seek information that *disproves* your beliefs.

2. ATTRIBUTION (or SELF-SERVING) BIAS – the belief that good things happen to us because of internal factors and bad things happen to us because of external factors, while the reverse is true with others. This bias causes us to pigeonhole the actions of others, especially bad behavior, as strictly the fault of the individual and not circumstances.

3. TRUSTING TESTIMONIAL EVIDENCE – the fallacy of believing information from someone else, even if there is no evidence to support their statements. Studies have consistently shown individuals are more likely to buy something on the recommendation of others than the strength of advertising or some other marketing effort, yet how many of those same people actually know the veracity of those recommendations?

4. MEMORY LAPSES – while this barrier seems on the surface to be fairly self-explanatory (everybody has gaps in memory), its danger lies in the common human trait of filling in the memory gaps with information that may or may not be true. In other

words, we make things up as we go along, which often prevents us from arriving at more fact-based decisions.

5. ACCEPTING AUTHORITY WITHOUT QUESTION – a behavior documented by the famous experiments of researcher Stanley Milgram in which many people were willing to administer increasingly more powerful shocks to other people on the orders of an authority figure, even though they weren't sure it was the right thing to do. This critical thinking failure continues to manifest itself today in the blind acceptance to people with questionable degrees or expertise.

6. GENERALIZING FROM TOO FEW OBSERVATIONS – a common practice in consumer marketing where a small group of people in a focus group determine the direction of multi-million dollar ad campaigns, even though the opinions of those people cannot be projected onto a larger population. The same occurrence happens when a small group of executives or board members discuss an issue. We must constantly resist the temptation to take these informational shortcuts. For example, one way to counter the built-in bias of small groups is to seek out the unvarnished input from employees lower on the organizational chart.

7. IGNORANCE OR THE FAILURE TO ADMIT IT – a trait that leads to fabricated information and wild speculation. Nobody wants to look foolish, so instead of admitting his or her lack of knowledge a person may fake it and then explain the fakery in a way that makes it seem true. Beware of those who are quick with answers or slow to admit they don't know something.

8. COINCIDENCE or THE LAW OF TRULY LARGE NUMBERS – the mistaken belief that pieces of information have causality when, in fact, they are the result of a pure coincidence or the law of large numbers. Any large block of data will show connections, but those connections most likely have no other meaning. For example, some hospital CEOs will likely have red hair, but no other link can be made between being a CEO and red hair. Yet, we often attach causal links to events or date where no links exist.

Like any other behavior in life worth doing, good critical thinking is all about turning ideas into habitual behavior. You first have to recognize that their critical thinking skills might not be up to par and then you must go about improving them. Only when you start applying those new skills again and again to a variety of circumstances will the skills stick and generate results. Critical thinking must become a force of habit for top leaders, much like their breathing. It must become part of your leadership core.

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