

SmartBlog on Leadership

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How to train employees to be critical thinkers

By Joel Garfinkle on November 19th, 2012

Critical thinking: It sounds like something college professors do.

And while critical-thinking skills are vital to academic research, they are equally important in the business environment. As you look to increase **visibility and influence** in the workplace, you need to become the professor of critical thinking for your team. Critical thinking is basically a questioning process. Here are three questions that will encourage employees to start thinking critically about their actions.

1. “I hear your question. What’s your answer?”
2. “What would you do if I weren’t here?”
3. “Are you using your brain or your gut?”

“I hear your question. What’s your answer?”

In their haste to keep projects moving, many managers instinctively want to provide quick solutions when employees have problems or questions. This approach does not foster critical thinking. It teaches employees to rely on your strengths rather than developing their own.

Here’s a better approach: Make it a policy that whenever an employee comes to you with a problem, he or she must also be prepared to show you at least one solution. This gives you an opportunity to have a discussion with the employee or even throw out the question in a **team meeting**. Collaboration among co-workers boosts critical thinking and leads to better decisions.

“What would you do if I weren’t here?”

Being a good manager does not involve parenting. Your job is to use your **leadership skills** to coach employees in becoming self-sufficient. Continue to strengthen their critical-thinking muscles by turning the questions back to them, answering a question with a question.

- “What are the risks if we take this action?”
- “What if we did A instead of B?”
- “What if the opposite were true?”

“Are you using your brain or your gut?”

Many managers pride themselves on the soundness of their “gut instinct.” They often make quick decisions based solely on sudden flashes of intuition. This intuition could be based on a feeling, a dream or a billboard they saw while driving to work. That’s not to say that intuition is invalid. But to be effective, it needs to be backed up with logic. If you’re modeling decision-making behavior based solely on gut instinct, you might be doing subordinates a disservice.

Remember the old bumper sticker “Question Authority”? When an employee comes to you with a gut-based decision, you need to start questioning.

- “Why do you think this will work?”
- “What assumptions have you made?”
- “What alternatives might we consider?”

When an employee’s decision is successful, acknowledge it. **Be publicly generous with your praise.** If he or she makes a mistake, use it as a learning opportunity, not a reason for criticism or blame. Continue to encourage employees to act independently, as if you were not present, and they will reward you and the company with sound decisions based on logic and common sense.

*Joel Garfinkle is one of the top 50 **personal leadership coaches** in America. He is the author of seven books, including “**Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level.**” More than 10,000 people receive his *Fulfillment@Work* newsletter. **Subscribe** and you’ll receive the free e-book “41 Proven Strategies to Get Promoted Now!”*