

## PM WORLD TODAY – VIEWPOINT – FEBRUARY 2010

## Critical Thinking in Project Management

By Melvyn Lee

A source defines critical thinking as *“the purposeful and reflective judgment about what to believe or what to do in response to observations, experience, verbal or written expressions or arguments”*

Despite all the planning done, project managers are often plagued with a litany of uncertainties. Should a project manager be concerned about situations or circumstances in the future of the project that might not even happen? On the other hand, a complacent project manager might react diametrically opposite by *“letting things happen and decide what to do when they do happens”*.

Why do projects hit with fresh problems or even repeated problems when they could have been easily anticipated? Should anxiety run high when a project manager needs to put all of his concerns on the saddle of his thoughts whether they may not exist, probably exist, likely to exist or surely to exist?

This is where critical thinking benefits project managers. Critical thinking is not only a method or technique but a weapon every project manager should be armed with. And there are enemies out there that are afraid of critical thinkers. So let's expose these enemies first.

### Enemies of Project Management

A project has so many unseen enemies. These enemies are not made from “flesh and blood”. They are elements, factors and variables a project manager needs to consider and manage with prudence. Ignoring or by-passing them can be a recipe for disaster.

Just what are the enemies of a project that a project manager need to seriously counter against?

#### 1. Assumptions

These can be a project killer if assumptions turned invalid when validity is expected, or vice versa. In cases where invalid assumptions mean what you thought things would be made available but have turned out to be otherwise, this can mean risks are nearing.

Therefore, non-critical thinkers that allow assumptions to bypass without validation will likely suffer the consequences of ill-preparation.

## 2. Dependencies

Another project killer is a type of leech called dependency. Dependencies form a locked-in relationship that can cause a long chain of reaction in a project. If left unchecked, it can stop the motion of project activities.

Non-critical thinkers who lack the ability to think critically about their dependencies are exposing activities on the critical path to be attacked. Project schedule can suffer the repercussions of baseline attack.

## 3. Risks

As we know risks have with probabilities latched to them. Risks, when left without response plans, will suffer the consequences of disorientation to your project plan. They can take you off course, simultaneously displacing your focus because energies and efforts are now shifted to risk-turned-to-reality.

Thinking critically can keep risks at bay by looking at many possibility of responding to risks even if it means taking much time to do so. On the other hand, non-critical thinkers leave circumstances to dictate their risks and this can wreck their project constraints.

## 4. Mindsets

Mindset comes from traditional ways of doing things that have proven to be correct. But this can be a project manager's enemy that seeks to destroy the deployment of creativity.

Mindsets usually come from the dark side of experiences. They can lock you into traditional perspectives, curtailing your visualization, keeping you from perceiving circumstances from optional angles.

Non-critical thinking project managers often bring with them an old mold that can't seem to fit into the current circumstances. Of course the easy way out is to change the circumstances to fit the mold, but this can tragically lead to project misfits.

## Benefits of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking throws project managers and their teams into situations that may not have existed yet or have possibilities of occurrence. In other words, critical thinkers can project you into virtual situations. It is a process that gives you the “feel and touch” of things that may happen but in reality remain as hypothesis or possibility.

Critical thinkers perch from the roof of the project to be more observant rather than ignorant of situations. This can lead project managers to making good propositions and even solutions by being deliberately judgmental on possibilities over realities.

Critical thinkers allow grounds for debates or arguments by throwing light to a given inference. They allow you to justify the scale of conclusions before taking them into acceptance. This gives project managers and their sponsors a full satisfaction as a result of good justification.

## Critical Thinkers as Overcomers

How do critical thinkers bring benefit and overcome the common enemies of projects as mentioned earlier?

### 1. Integrating thought processes to develop integrated solutions

Critical thinking project managers promote holistic thoughts. Instead of asking “*How does this particular problem affect dept A?*”, it opens up a whole lot of possibility “*How does outcome of problem A, B and C affect dept A?*” or “*How do you overcome problems in dept A, B and C by resolving problem in dept A?*”. Critical thinking does appear to provide a one solution for all and it is precisely that it is intended to be.

Thinking critically is like working on an expansive canvass, enabling you to think of the criticality of a problem that may have wider effects, affecting larger situations and stakeholders. When one has thought about things critically, then it is possible to integrate every possible outcomes of different causes in a project can lead to an integrated solution, which can effectively counter a tide of problems coming a project manager’s way.

### 2. Removing “taking things for granted” attitude and pervasive culture of complacency

If thoughts are not critical, they are dormant thoughts. Consequently, things are left as they are because it is assumed that they would never happen. An intrusion of a virus into

a web application server is impossible because it is armed with firewall and anti-virus panacea. This allows a dead end thought. The fact that injecting critical thoughts opens up a whole new inquisition like “Is the virus definition updated on a regular basis?”, “Are policies in place to disable the download of foreign software or program into the server?”

Critical thinking breaks open dead ends and is an enemy to complacency. Critical thinking project managers don't rest on their thinking laurels. They are actively looking for possibilities and seeking a shaft of possible breakthroughs in times of uncertainties.

### **3. Modifying old patterns of thoughts**

Critical thinking project managers disrupt old ways of thinking. A project manager may have completed a series of successful projects. But those experiences may have negative effects if they become a template of thought which a project manager uses to apply in the current project.

The danger lies when the current project has a different configuration altogether. Hence, the old pattern of thoughts is considered obsolete, and has no way of influencing the outcome of the current situation. This is disastrous and a sheer waste of time. A rework is usually its consequences.

A critical thinking system does not allow traditional ways to reign. In fact, critical thinking project managers know how to tap fresh ideas, methods and solutions from a rich combination of his project management team or subject matter expertise.

Indeed, arrogance and ignorance must be put aside for such critical thinkers to thrive.

### **4. Exposing Blind Spot**

It is easy for some areas to be by-passed by a project manager. These areas have dropped into what I called a blind spot zone of a project manager. Those who have lacked of experiences tend to have greater blind spot zone.

But applying criticality to some questions can expose these hidden areas in the blind spot zone. Though some critical thinking can lead to seemingly trivial questions, they are worthwhile asking. Prevention is better than cure. Don't be ashamed of asking questions even how simple they may sound. Going back to basics is great. It may just save your day!

## 5. Evaluating paths that are less traveled

In a project, sometimes certain areas are not explored for reasons due to budget constraint, lack of manpower, avoiding risks, etc.

However, in a complex or high risk project, a project manager should take risk delving into areas that have not been explored. If time, schedule and resources permit, critical thinking enables a project manager to look into other rare avenues that might save project costs or even open up more business opportunities.

Critical thinkers tend to contest the thoughts of others. They do not just accept things the way they are. They are risk takers. They jump into the circumstances and look for clues that might lead to breakthroughs.

## 6. Away from the crowd instinct

It is often easy to go along with the crowd. After all a majority voice does sound like a victorious voice. Wrong! By moving into critical thinking, project managers can seriously reevaluate decisions and opinions that were once popular but may not apply in today's circumstances.

In fact, a crowd usually agrees on common ground because to resist means disharmonizing the momentum of the project. But critical thinking project managers must learn to challenge plural decisions from angles that a crowd may feel intimidated to look into.

## Think Now to Save the Future of the Project

Critical thinking project managers have a greater chance of not just surviving the turbulence of their project storms. They can, in fact, counter the dangers or pitfalls of a project and emerge successfully.

Critical thinking project managers are those who consider themselves accountable for the project, as they are willing to take ownership of the success or failure of their projects. Unpretentiously daring, they are willing to ask hard and shameless questions, unafraid of ridicule and reproach.

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