Critical Thinking for Responsible Leadership^

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Unsustainable activities and lifestyles are damaging the environment, reducing biodiversity, depleting natural capital and contributing to global warming and climate change. The 13th United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Emissions Gap Report 2022 issued a stark warning ahead of the recent COP 27 meeting in Sharm al-Sheikh, Egypt. It concluded that the carbon cutting plans of Governments since COP 26 have been "woefully inadequate" and that there is "no credible pathway" to keeping global temperature rises below 1.5°C (UNEP, 2022). What are the implications of the report's call for the rapid transformation of societies against the background of a closing window of opportunity to avert disaster for leaders of organisations, those who advise them and management services practitioners?

Many individuals and organisations face multiple but inter-related challenges and difficult choices. Addressing them may require the critique, review and resetting of aspirations and expectations, purposes and priorities, and goals and objectives. Visions and values, assumptions and beliefs, and societal and environmental responsibilities may need to be questioned and current activities, operations and lifestyles challenged. If societal transformation is to be achieved, fundamentals might have to be reviewed and reset. Breaks with the past may have to occur. Company directors, many other leaders and professionals who advise them should exercise independent judgement. How might critical thinking help?

Critical thinking can involve pause, reflection and a re-visiting of assumptions (Chatfield, 2017). Given the scale and trajectory of challenges, larger steps may be needed. Innovation and radical change rather than incremental improvement may be required. Being courageous and bold in the face of risk and uncertainty may have to be balanced with caution, prudence and responsibility. Some are better than others at handling choices and trade-offs, reconciling shared and contending interests, and addressing both short-term pressures and longer-term requirements. Discussion and critique may enable a diverse, questioning and vibrant team, or a more homogenous, compliant and unimaginative one, to explore options and alternatives.

Critical Thinking Considerations

Critical thinking, scepticism, an understanding of human behaviour and motivation, and an independent and questioning approach are important for business leaders, directors, boards and their advisers, and productivity and performance consultants (Coulson-Thomas, 2022). Active questioning and critical thinking are inter-related. Stimulating one can support the development of the other (Lorencová et. al. 2019). While open-minded and listening to others, confident practitioners form their own opinions and exercise independent judgement. They recognise that 'things are not always what they seem'. Directors may need to question assumptions, probe root causes, assess sources and explore drivers when discharging their distinct and onerous legal duties and responsibilities.

Directors and project reviewers are often faced with multiple documents that may contain detailed and complex information. On occasion, items may be circulated at relatively short

notice, or even tabled at a meeting. The challenge is often to identify and distil key elements, messages and themes, assess their significance and relevance to what and for whom, and consider how to respond. Critique can involve evaluation, reflection and judgement about whether to accept or reject an assessment, proposal or suggestion, or suspend judgement while seeking clarification, more information or clearer justification. It could entail considering a document's purpose, the context in which it appears, supporting arguments and evidence, and any apparent weaknesses or limitations.

Over time, aspirations, expectations and what might be accepted or tolerated can change. In periods of crisis, flux and stress, they should not be assumed or taken for granted. They might have to be confirmed or re-evaluated and reset. Addressing challenges and existential threats and individual, corporate and collective responses to them may require the critique, review and resetting of aspirations and expectations, purposes and priorities and goals and objectives. Given recent developments and uncertainty, visions and values, assumptions and beliefs, and social and environmental responsibilities may also need to be questioned and challenged and discussed and debated. For example, do accounts and reports fairly reflect negative consequences of corporate operations?

Critical Thinking for Assessment and Decision Making

Critical thinking is not always easy to define, understand and achieve. Practitioners may encounter it during their education or professional development. Many institutions encourage the critique of sources (Zhou, 2022). For academics, the ability to critique, think abstractly and contextualize is important for teaching and learning. Critical thinking has been an educational goal of many universities. Students in liberal democracies may be encouraged to engage with, think about and critique rather than just accept, reproduce or describe what they experience or see, and read or are taught. Director selection committees should assess how well candidates for board appointments can do this. Project managers and lead consultants may look for similar qualities in members of their teams.

The context in which advice or information is received, and its source, accuracy, objectivity and relevance are all factors that may influence the credence and weight that should be put upon it. Has it been rapidly pulled together without much thought, and authenticated or corroborated and carefully considered, before its presentation to a board, committee or other decision making body? One should avoid basing judgements on dubious assumptions, partial views or foundations of sand. The rigour of analysis and thought should reflect what is at stake and possible consequences of a decision or other response. Risks of limited analysis and thinking time and of tools, techniques and methodologies used may need to be considered.

Many boards and decision makers have to make strategic choices. Fundamental re-thinking may be required to change direction and/or undertake necessary adaptations and transitions and transformation journeys. Critical thinking can avoid risks associated with questionable measurement, inadequate analysis and snap decisions. However, inaction, indecision and delay can also incur risks. In addition to boards and others who provide strategic direction, critical thinking is also important for those responsible for its execution and implementation.

It may be beneficial more widely if collective responses to shared challenges are required and both business model and lifestyle changes are needed.

Critical Thinking in Boards, Committees and Review Teams

Board and other chairs and team leaders should encourage critical thinking and ensure adequate opportunity for challenge, questioning, discussion and debate. Reviews should assess the extent and rigour of these activities and whether because of conformity, groupthink, lack of diversity, being rule-bound or other factors a board or other group has become dysfunctional (Janis, 1972, Brown and Peterson, 2022), Active questioning, challenge and critical thinking can lead to a virtuous spiral of increasing assurance. Directors, reviewers and assessors should think about their targets, timing and approach before challenging and develop a questioning strategy. Responses and reactions to an initial question may suggest supplementary ones, further critique and new areas to probe.

At some meetings generalisations may be uttered that might not relate to issues discussed or what a project or assignment is about. An ability to discern and address what is distinctive and significant about a particular matter, response or situation, identify alternative and viable courses of action, and the foresight to imagine and consider their implications and possible consequences are valuable qualities for directors and others to have. Challenging, exploring and probing with relevant and insightful questions can require a critical, curious and sceptical mindset. Critical thinking can also help when formulating or assessing an argument or proposal, discerning relevance and understanding the limits of generalization (Tittle, 2011).

Critical thinking and being willing to question and challenge can also be beneficial outside of a meeting, for example when collecting information. While respecting those they encounter and being tactful, some directors and practitioners try so hard to be diplomatic and tactful, and not to ruffle feathers that they may fail to spot signals and understand what is really going on. Their reticence and politeness may prevent or inhibit others from reflection, thinking, questioning and raising concerns. Disagreement is different from disloyalty and loyalty obtained without question may be counter-productive. A desire for consensus on a way forward should not be allowed to prematurely curb questioning and discussion.

Pressures to Conform and the Courage to Critique

Critical thinking and challenge may reduce or contain the groupthink that often limits small team effectiveness, even if they do not entirely prevent it (Janis, 1972). The practice and benefits of critical thinking may be enhanced when it is accompanied by a greater diversity of team membership. In the re-thinking now required from boards and teams facing existential challenges every member should reflect, form independent judgements and have an opportunity to express an opinion. There is often a wide gulf between rhetoric and reality. Those with power such as a CEO or project manager may advocate openness and challenge, while discouraging or resisting questioning of their own actions, priorities or preferences.

Some team members and professionals face social and group pressure to 'fit in' and 'go along' with established positions that seem to be supported by colleagues and be underpinned

past decisions and/or key players (Janis, 1972). This could be the case within a board, and more widely across a company and among influential stakeholders. It may take courage to question a purpose, direction and strategy, and objectives, priorities or positions that have been authoritatively endorsed and are supported by an apparent consensus. Persistence may be required. Minority views may turn out to be right, even if belatedly (Hanscomb, 2019). Governance arrangements and board practices may not always provide for their periodic review. Even when reviews are advocated, they may not happen. When they do occur, areas that might be felt to be controversial or sensitive are sometimes ignored or overlooked.

Certain colleagues might feel that to challenge when support is sought is disloyal. However, contributing to a discussion in a helpful way may be the responsible course of action to adopt. Following initial questions, a wider sense of unease may emerge. The courage of a person to speak up, and the timing and tone of an intervention, may cause others to follow. This might initiate pressure to review, rethink and address fundamentals and root causes. A crisis or difficult situation can also sometimes cause a particular group to confront realities, engage in critical thinking, see matters in a different light, change direction and/or pursue different priorities and new possibilities. This could be what is currently required (UNEP, 2022).

Critiquing Inputs to Assessment and Decision Making

The relevance, quality and impact of decisions and assessments can reflect the advice, briefings, reports, and financial and other information decision makers and assessors receive. Much may depend upon their objectivity, timeliness and accuracy and who produced them and for what purpose. Have they been amended or sanitised for a certain reason and/or from a particular perspective? Document drafters sometimes modify or leave out what they fear may be unwelcome, such as negative externalities. These may not be measured or estimated and reported. Papers may be biased to reflect prevailing views, respect past decisions and current priorities, further vested interests, or communicate preferred messages. Critique and scepticism may improve productivity and performance assessments and decision making.

Too often, information and other inputs are received uncritically, without their recipients exploring the assumptions and sources upon which they are based. Accounts and financial reports may fail to address the negative consequences of corporate operations, activities and offerings. Their associated costs and other impacts are often borne by those affected, which may be whole communities and the environment. Matters raised and questions posed may be described as complex or 'needing work' to address in an attempt to deter further enquiry. Such ploys may indicate a lack of understanding or attempt to conceal, and suggest an area of vulnerability. Body language and facial expressions can sometimes be very revealing.

Openness, candour, honesty and integrity can encourage critical thinking. Mutual trust and respect and full and frank discussion can contribute to collective effectiveness. Uncertain and weak boards can be defensive. Some insecure directors resist and react against criticism, particularly from those they consider to be in inferior positions to themselves. More confident individuals welcome comments, insights and suggestions. They listen to feedback and may value practitioners who provide independent, objective and evidence-based advice. They may

explicitly engage those who express critical views, identifying areas for improvement and reviewing lessons, responses and initiatives. On occasion they may change direction. .

Retaining Balance and Proportion

In dynamic situations, circumstances and contexts, much may change between reviews of purpose, direction and strategy, and objectives, priorities or positions. Busy colleagues beset with contending pressures and concerned about the impact of events upon themselves and their activities may not always devote the thinking time required to assess the implications of developments for a project, an assignment or a company and its stakeholders. Thinking that occurs under pressure can be defensive and protective. It may reflect established assumptions, strategies and priorities, rather than be about different possibilities. 'Groupthink' may be a risk especially when relatively established and homogenous groups get together (Janis, 1972).

Many experienced practitioners think carefully about when, where and whom or what to challenge or question before speaking up. One needs a sense of balance, materiality, proportion and timing. Making mountains out of molehills can alienate board, project or assignment colleagues. Something may appear questionable, but is it worth speaking up when an issue may be immaterial in the context of the whole and there may be more important matters on or off an agenda to address? At the same time, there may be occasions when something that at first sight seems innocuous represents the tip of an iceberg. Intervening might open a window onto areas that are worthy of exploration.

A matter might not need to be raised at a board or project review meeting for it to have an impact. Some issues may be resolved off line, or through a quiet word with the 'appropriate person'. Directors and practitioners should behave responsibly and proportionately. They should focus on the overall picture and consider whether a flow of decisions, events and/or information suggests a trend, pattern of behaviour, problem, deficiency or vulnerability. Interventions, contributions and advice should be concise, lucid, coherent and logical. Where time may be short and interruptions are anticipated, thought should be given to the order of comments, to ensure key points are aired and priority concerns are addressed.

Reducing Negative Impacts

Critical thinking, critique and questioning should not be assumed. Practitioners should be alert to evidence of their absence and possible consequences (Brown and Peterson, 2022). A board could take steps to ensure they happen. For example, 'high fliers' or candidates for possible future board roles could be asked to critique a company's priorities, strategy, operations or the net carbon, environmental and/or social impact of corporate activities from an environmental perspective or that of an investor, customer, community or competitor. They could be asked to identify vulnerabilities, risks and missed opportunities, and suggest what ought to be done about them and what they could contribute. Similar exercises could be encouraged and arranged in business units or geographic, project and/or functional teams.

Advocates of more responsible leadership and strategic direction sometimes question the contribution of directors and boards and the value they and their advisers add, rather than

focus on reducing negative consequences. The damaging impacts of collective corporate activities on biodiversity, the environment, natural capital and global warming suggest more could be done to ensure negative externalities are identified and addressed. A focus on adding more value and increasing contribution sometimes reflects a reality that more responsible leadership is required. Corporate accounting and reporting policies and practices may reveal the extent to which a board is aware, responsible and transparent. Those of many companies seem designed to conceal the full extent of negative externalities.

Challenges facing COP 27 delegations suggest collective action is needed while there is still time (UNEP, 2022). Rather than play down or conceal contributions to global warming, boards should encourage their identification and initiatives to reduce them. Understanding the drivers and root causes of operations and proposals that appear irresponsible or prove to be harmful, may enable them be addressed. Board and executive team ambition, imagination and drive should be aligned. Encouraging people to critique current priorities and activities, and consider less damaging alternatives, might stimulate contributions to sustainability. Critical thinking might initiate transition and transformation journeys that benefit organisations, their people, other stakeholders, the natural environment and future generations.

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