

## Fear – Overwhelming the Ability to Think Critically

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### Introduction

For the last eight to ten years it seems that our country, our economy and our everyday ability to live our lives have been driven by some force that has everyone and every aspect of our daily lives on edge. We could certainly try to put names on that force but our goal is to try and address this phenomenon. We see this force as fear! Fear of baseless rumors and media “news.” Fear of each other because we have been led to believe that if someone thinks differently, they are dangerous. Fear that if someone is politically on the “other” side they are dangerous. This fear may not seem like a leadership issue to some of our readers but we suggest that fear is reaching into every aspect of our lives and is impacting businesses, organizations and everyday living. We want to try and focus on that fear and why it is impacting people’s ability to think critically. Critical thinking is that God given ability to analyze issues and make reasonable, rational decisions based on facts.

Our country is going through a time when it seems that facts don’t matter. Rumor and false innuendos rule the day. Our new world of social media and instant “information” consume people. Everywhere you look people are glued to their phones and accessing information while rarely questioning the validity of what they are reading. The old adage – if it’s on the internet it must be true – seems to be absolutely true to many, many people. Journalism used to follow strict guidelines about verifying information before printing it. The digital world doesn’t seem to worry about verification. Anyone can set up a podcast and pretty much say anything they want.

Our last two issues of UPDATE in 2021 dealt with the topic of Critical Thinking. As usual we looked at Critical Thinking from a leadership perspective. In this issue we will explore how fear affects critical thinking. It is intuitive that fear affects critical thinking,

but by what mechanism? The reason we are delving into this topic is over the past several years we are noticing a phenomenon of seemingly unexplainable behaviors and beliefs that are counter to the source of these observations. More simplistically said, why seemingly intelligent individuals are afraid of certain things when if approached with critical thinking, their fear might just disappear.

While we know this is a difficult and complex issue, we also found there to be a significant amount of research on this matter, and the more one drills down into the various aspects of critical thinking, the more complex it becomes. We are not researchers. We are practitioners living and working in a very real world. For better or worse, we are attempting to lend some structure to this issue which we hope will shed light or at least some degree of understanding into the dilemma of what appears to be a lack of critical thinking. One more side note, when recently chatting with a middle school teacher, she indicated she is seeing the importance of critical thinking and it may become part of their curriculum (of course tailored to middle school students). So here we go.

### What is Critical Thinking?

Critical Thinking is a process that is key to good decision making at any level – business or personal. It does not come naturally and must be developed and continually fine-tuned. A definition of Critical Thinking:

Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluation information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning or communication as a guide to belief and action.

That is a mouthful! Let's boil it down to a simplified statement: a disciplined process of looking at all aspects of an issue and thinking through the information before making a decision. While it sounds arduous and time consuming, it need not be in all cases. The key is that it is a conscious process to think an issue through rather than just accepting something from social media or making a decision that requires the least amount of effort.

Critical thinking is a conscious process. That said the process can be used to solve difficult issues while making use of clear data - i.e. used in a productive way to get the best solution. It can also be used to further one's person agenda – used in a way to “prove” some potentially flawed thinking.

A third aspect of critical thinking is basically not thinking at all. We appear to be living in a time when too many people are just plain lazy and do not want to do any deep thinking. Not only is there no critical thinking, there is not much thinking at all. Social media and the rising of cable news networks, with competing political philosophies, which purport to tell “the true story” have created a growing generation of people who do not and do not want to think about important things and make informed decisions. Fox News or CNN or MSNBC or News Nation have told us how to think about important issues – why should I have to spend energy investigating and discovering the true facts?

There are many psychological impediments to critical thinking. We'll discuss those later in this article. As we discussed above there is objective use of the skill which is true critical thinking and there is an emotional use of the skill to achieve an irrational end point.

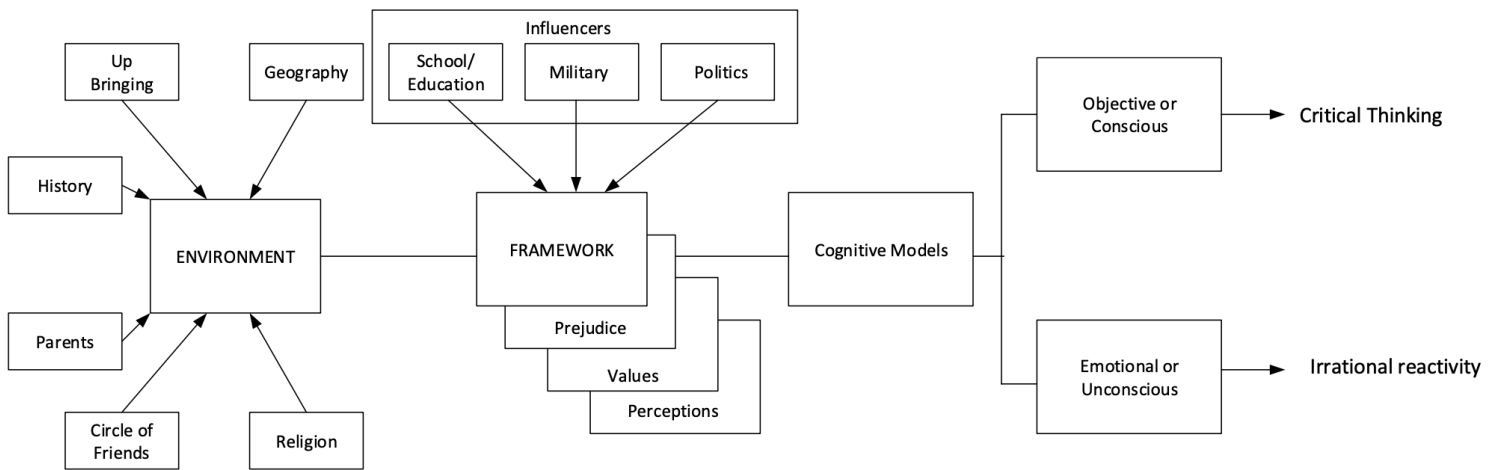
**Fear and How It Impacts Critical Thinking**

Fear is a significant psychological impediment to critical thinking. Fear can cause the fight/flight/freeze response, which suppresses higher-order thinking. The fear of failure or the fear of change is most likely to act as a hindrance to critical thinking. Sometimes, when we look at an issue from every angle, we find that the only right reaction is to change. If we fear failure, we're likely to not act or try at all.

When it comes to trying to discern the truth in order to act upon it, not doing so can be far worse than the perceived failure itself.

*By Stacy Farrell / December 8, 2023*

To get our heads around all this, we built a model. Something to assist on setting relationships to guide both our thoughts and words. The figure below is our attempt at that structure. Our attempt is to simplify much of the terminology in research papers into a structure that makes sense to many people on the receiving end of massive amounts of content.



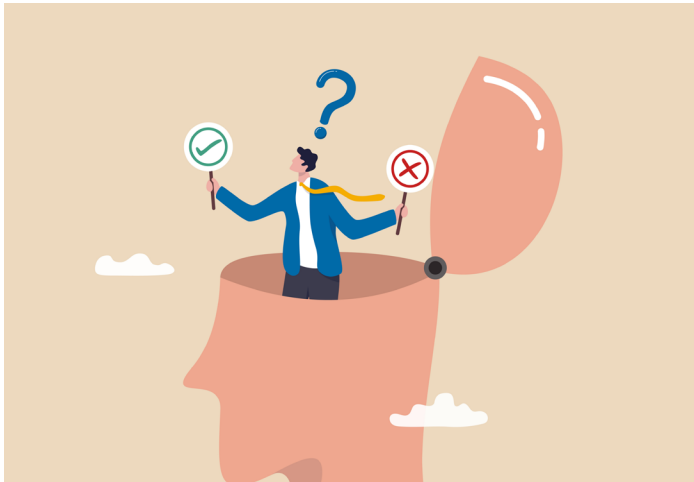
Our thinking begins with Environment. Environment is something experienced early life and manifested throughout life. We believe one's Environment is comprised of six blocks. We urge our readers to think about their environment and how those six blocks affect their environment, particularly early in life, and who you are as an adult. The blocks are rather self-explanatory, but each on their own contribute significantly to who we are as adults. Think about it for a while.

Moving on from Environment is a Framework. This is where the pieces start coming together. At this stage in the overall structure, people become influenced by a multitude of ‘influencers.’ While we show three, we realize there are can be many others. The combination of Environment and Influencers in essence create a framework for an individual. This framework includes our prejudices, values, perceptions and others.

From the Framework, we are suggesting the formation of Cognitive Models. The American Psychological Association defines Cognitive models as:

*A theoretical view of thought and mental operations, which provides explanations for observed phenomena and makes predictions about an unknown future. People are continually creating and accessing internal representations (models) of what they are experiencing in the world for the purposes of perception, comprehension, and behavior selection (action).*

For the purposes of this article, we characterize Cognitive Models as; Objective/Conscious or Emotional/Unconscious.



Fear can come from the Environment and/or the Influencers in one's life. After all they define you to a large degree and unless you are willing to challenge them, they will continue to define you. They can be challenged as you develop as a person but you must be willing to challenge.

So where are we going with all this? When most people think of fear, they see it as the fight/flight/freeze response, where the body reacts before the conscious mind is aware. We are looking at fear a bit differently. In the context of this article, we are considering fear as a phenomenon or terminology or something in one's past or current life that has had negative connotations, not well understood or perhaps, a result of an individual's environment, framework, and/or cognitive models but distorted because of the lack of critical examination or thinking.

### Summary

We are suggesting, as indicated above, fear suppresses higher-order thinking; and fear is a significant psychological obstacle to critical thinking acting as a hindrance to critical thinking.

Fear can negatively impact critical thinking by interrupting the brain's ability to regulate emotions, read non-verbal cues, and act ethically. This can lead to impulsive reactions and intense emotions while ignoring facts that might suggest more rational thinking and actions.

We feel strongly that the demise of critical thinking is a major factor in what is going on in our world today. Too many people are afraid of, unwilling to, don't know how to, too lazy to expend energy to critically evaluate key situations that impact their lives. People can be taught the skills of critical thinking. But if people are afraid or unwilling to spend some time seriously thinking about a situation or unwilling to challenge the environmental factors and influencers in their lives we will continue to live in our conflicted world. Why do intelligent, well educated people continually ignore facts and reason and contribute to the conflict in our world?

Please send us your thoughts!

Below are links to our previous articles regarding Critical Thinking:

<http://www.themacrisgroup.com/newsletters/Vol20Iss3-Sep2021.pdf>

<http://www.themacrisgroup.com/newsletters/Vol20Iss4-Dec2021.pdf>

### A Note of Acknowledgment

We want to thank Dr. Fredrick M. Ball for his assistance with this article. Whenever we embark on topics that delve into areas we find more involved, we believe it important to engage our colleagues who either stimulate our thinking and/or ensure we are reasonably accurate in our position. Fredrick's technical background: human performance in complex systems to include human/ system engineering and R&D, human/system performance assessment/enhancement; and operational training/interactive simulation system development was important to us completing this article.



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