

Critical Thinking – Maybe a Paradigm to Sort it All Out

A. C. Macris & Larry Reiter



We continue to explore and pursue the concept of critical thinking. We believe it to be a critically missing component of the human condition. Remember, critical thinking is not difficult, but it requires some work and effort. We are not particularly sure this condition of ignoring critical thinking has not always been with us, but it certainly appears to be predominate in today's world of instantaneous gratification, be it a matter of the quantity and quality of information available, the rate at which information is available or the ability to voice one's opinion regardless of its validity on almost any forum, reaching literally thousands of people. That sort of catharsis started a while back when email became a forum for emotional responses with little personal interaction with the other party plus the ability to broadly distribute one's opinion at the push of a keystroke. Our leadership workshops cautioned our participants about this phenomenon. Email responses that pushed the limits of civility became empowering since there was a digital barrier and lack of interpersonal interaction. Advance to social media, text messaging and real-time video and voila - here we are. There is no time or need for critical thinking, right? It just feels good to let the world know how we feel and to voice our opinions or reinforce those of other space shot opinions. Facts and truth don't matter since we are spouting our opinions. Right, wrong or indifferent, someone out there will respond – it's just a numbers game. Then once a group sees there are others who sympathize with their position, as we used to say in the 1960s, we have a "Happening." Simpatico people who feel as we do, and for the most part aren't critical thinkers. Wow is it that simple? Probably not but it sure looks that way. When you can reach people without directly talking with them you are empowered to say anything without the fear of being challenged to provide facts or truth.

Our last article delved more into the notion of critical thinking, as we attempted to drill down into the precursors that cultivated particular approaches to either critically think or to let emotions dictate their positions. We received very positive feedback on that article, and thank those who took the time to get back to us. So we pondered our next step, determining that we had two ways we could move forward; one was to continue to drill down into the topic of critical thinking or we could look in a different direction as a way to sort it all out, perhaps in a more in-situ and applied context. We took the later path. With that said, one thought came to mind, and it was from many years ago.

During the last semester of undergraduate studies at the University of Illinois for one of your authors, a required course was Automatic Controls. The professor was relatively young and the course was extremely difficult. So we were closing in on the last class and everyone was quite relieved. Not knowing what to expect, the professor started by telling us this last session has nothing to do with Automatic Controls. He acknowledged that most of us would remember virtually nothing from the course once we graduated. So he proceeded to tell us that what he was going to talk about would stay with us for most of our lives, and the only thing we would remember from the class. The context of his talk was selecting a graduate/doctoral committee.

The context was a model for how to select an advisory board for a doctoral thesis if we moved on in our formal education or a lesson in life.

He drew the below diagram on the board in front of the class, as indicated below, verbally describing the characteristics we should look for in an advisory board. We provided additional descriptors that fill the boxes based on inputs noted at the end of the article.

	Aggressive	Lazy
Smart	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tackles Problems • Relentless • Does not accept defeat • COO • Middle Management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic decisions • Focuses on efficiency • Saving costs • Underappreciated • Possesses intellectual clarity and composure for difficult decisions • Focuses on key priorities
Dumb	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No self-awareness • Doesn't know what they don't know • Actively makes things worse • Dangerous 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little use • Needs supervision • Simple task • Nothing but mischief • Creates more work for others • Should be eliminated from team

It goes this way, for a primary advisor you want to select a SMART AGGRESSIVE person. One who will go to bat for you, work with you to truly assist in your achieving your goals. The remainder of your committee should be SMART LAZY people. They will understand what you are trying to achieve but will not be obstacles.

He continued on, stating emphatically, stay away from the DUMB AGGRESSIVE person. They are nothing but trouble. Think about it – we are certain our readers can think of one if not several people in their lives where they have had the unfortunate opportunity of having interacted or worked with such a person. They are difficult to deal with in almost any context, and certainly any interaction will not impact their perspective on the world.

Finally he said that the DUMB LAZY person is of no benefit.

This has stayed with me for over 50 years. We find the model is valid on a daily basis.

How does this relate to Critical Thinking?

We had to dig more into the above concept and found an interesting article titled: *The 5 Basic Laws of Human Stupidity, According To Cipolla*. Who is Cipolla? Carlo M Cipolla was an Italian economic historian. He was a member of both the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society.

Cipolla produced two non-technical, popular essays that circulated in English among friends in 1973 and 1976, and then were published in 1988, first in Italian, under the title “Allegro, ma non Troppo” (“Forward, but not too fast” or “Happy, but not too much”, from the musical phrase meaning “Quickly, but not

too quick”).

His second Essay is the one we are focusing on: “The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity” (“Le leggi fondamentali della stupidità umana”, 1976), explores the controversial subject of stupidity. It was published in book form in 2011 by Doubleday.

These are Cipolla's five fundamental laws of stupidity:

1. Always and inevitably, each of us underestimates the number of stupid individuals in world.
2. The probability that a certain person is stupid is independent of any other characteristic of that person.
3. A stupid person is a person who causes harm to another person or to a group without at the same time obtaining a benefit for himself or even damaging himself.
4. Non-stupid people always underestimate the harmful potential of stupid people.
5. A stupid person is the most dangerous person that exists.

There is a bit of a terminology issue. Part may be timing. The last class I keep referring to was in May 1971. Cipolla's second essay was 1976. He uses ‘stupid,’ my professor used ‘dumb.’ Then there is ‘intelligent’ where my professor uses ‘smart.’ While I think the point is similar, in today's world there is nuanced difference in both. A little more digging we find the following to be the difference.

Cipolla defines stupid as:

“A stupid person is one who causes harm to another person or group of people without obtaining, at the same time, a profit, or even harms himself.”

In the context of leadership he says:

In fact, it is not unusual for people with an excessive ego and poor knowledge to reach positions of power from which they can make terrible decisions that drag with them those who depend on them directly or indirectly. (The emphasis is ours.)

Dumb v Stupid: There are definitions distinguishing dumb from stupid. Dumb and stupid are two adjectives that often used to refer to unintelligence or ignorance. It generally is associated with diminished intellectual capabilities, but as we see almost every day people with strong intellectual capabilities can act/behave stupidly. It is mainly in American English that dumb is used as a synonym for stupid. That is where we are in this article.

Smart and intelligent are often used interchangeably to describe someone who is intelligent, but they can have different meanings.

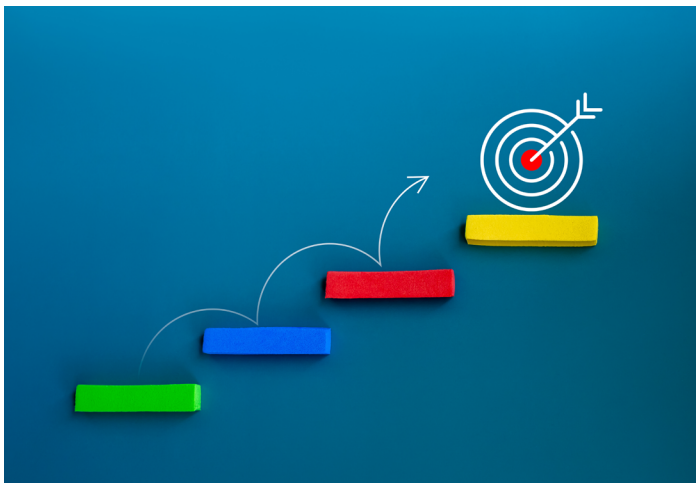
Smart v Intelligent: Can refer to someone who has improved their mind through learning and study. They may be good at memorizing information and passing tests. Smart can also mean someone who is effective at delivering a message around a truth, even if that truth isn't immediately obvious.

Intelligence primarily concerns cognitive aptitude and problem-solving abilities, while the word smartness emphasizes practical wisdom and adaptability in real-life situations. In contrast, intellectualism focuses on the pursuit of knowledge, critical

thinking, and engagement with ideas, often transcending the boundaries of immediate practicality.

Here it Comes – Critical Thinking

Beyond labeling people, it is important to understand the risks that represents stupidity. Actually, we can all behave stupidly, if we don't measure the scope of our actions or words. If we don't develop or use *critical thinking* and forget the necessary introspection, we can become victims of stupidity, suffering it or exercising it.



How do we apply this to Leadership?

It is intuitive that our ideal workforce would be smart/aggressive people. But then reality sets in. That ideal can never be achieved. A typical workforce is going to have all four quadrants of the diagram. The challenge is how can you effectively use people who fall in each quadrant? Let's dispense with one quadrant quickly – the Dumb/Lazy people. Yes, invariably, you will have some of these. If they are in a non-critical role and do what you ask of them, they might survive. In any other role they need to be weeded out of the organization. They are not going to improve and can slow down your organization.

Smart/Aggressive

These are key to your success. They understand your mission and your direction, fully support it and will challenge it to make it better. Sometimes you have to reign them in, but that is not the worst problem to have. If their aggressiveness becomes a problem you may have to get aggressive with them. However, they normally are key contributors to your organizational success.

Smart/Lazy

These people understand your mission and direction but are not

necessarily going to challenge or have ideas that can significantly make improvements. They will do what you need them to do. You may need to push them to do more than the minimum. These people need some direction for the day-to-day, but not on the mission.

Dumb/Aggressive

Unfortunately, you will have some of these people. They tend to get ahead by being loud and projecting knowledge or skills that they do not fully have. They are convinced that by being aggressive and loud they can make leaders and peers accept their concept of their capabilities. These people will challenge direction and even rules, based on their mislead concept of their abilities. They may have risen in the organization based on their bluster. They may even have risen to critical positions in the organization. Sooner or later their true capabilities or lack thereof will become evident. It becomes a challenge of how to deal with the Dumb/Aggressive employee. Identifying specialized training may be an option and it may or may not be successful, but it could well be worth a try. You can try to refocus or channel their aggressive behavior. In most cases you are going to have to make a difficult decision on what to do with these people. They talk a great game but that is where it ends – all talk.

Conclusion

Critical thinking is essential to success in life. We may not always realize we are assessing a problem (big or small) critically but if we are attuned to thinking before acting, we are probably applying critical thinking. The model we presented above is a tool to help us understand the people in our organization or in our life circle. Smart/Aggressive people may come on a little strong, but are the kind of people who help push growth. It takes all kind of people to make up our world. We have to recognize those who fall into the different quadrants of our model and how to deal with them. It sounds like common sense, but as our world continues to show us, common sense is not all that common!

In our next article we will discuss techniques and methods for developing and/or improving critical thinking skills.

References

- Principia Scientific International, November 2, 2021: The 5 Basic Laws of Human Stupidity, According To Cipolla
- The Green Book: Lead with the Best Version of Yourself
- <https://fs.blog/2013/05/warren-buffett-the-three-things-i-look-for-in-a-person/>) Warren Buffett: Why Lazy and Smart People Make the Best Leaders

M THE
MACRIS GROUP
EST. 1985



PO Box 535
Mystic, CT 06355
(860) 572-0043

www.themacrisgroup.com • acmpc@acmacris.com