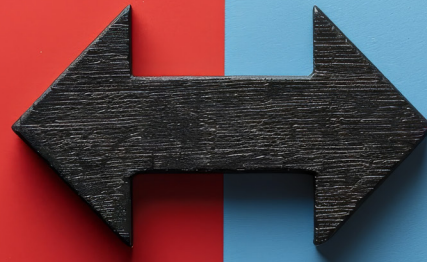


# Inconsistent Leadership – A Byproduct of Being Unwilling to Think Critically?

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## Introduction

We have been talking about Critical Thinking in our articles since 2021, focusing on leadership. In our first article, we noted the following definition of Critical Thinking from *National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking, 1987*: “It entails the examination of those structures or elements of thought implicit in all reasoning: purpose, problem, question-at-issue; assumptions; concepts; empirical grounding; reasoning leading to conclusions; implications and consequences; objections from alternative viewpoints; and frame of reference.”

We sum it up as being able to sort out the BS from the truth, realizing that is an over simplification. But at a 30,000 foot level we see four key leadership attributes or behaviors:

- Self-Directed – developing and carrying out a plan to improve one's leadership skills and personal competencies.
- Self-Disciplined – controlling impulses and emotions to prioritize tasks, meet deadlines, and maintain excellence.
- Self-Monitored – adapting to different situations and followers.
- Self-Corrective – evaluating decisions, strategies, and interactions, and taking action to improve.

People find it easier to react to a situation than to think it through critically. Reactivity tends to result in a lack of understanding, compassion and tolerance. Lately, we have been seeing the same concerning behaviors in life in general – the way people react to each other, the way our politicians behave, the way media covers life events, etc. We believe this has led to inconsistency in not just leadership but also in our everyday life.

Those of us with the opportunity to attend college learned how to think through problems. No matter what our major was we were introduced to a need to think issues through. It certainly was not called Critical Thinking, but it was the need to think about problems or issues before deciding on a course of action or response. Why has that disciplined thinking process become an ancient artifact? Why and how did we get to the state where response precedes thought?

Our most recent article from August 2024 titled “Critical Thinking – Maybe a Paradigm to Sort it Out” was conceived because we are confounded by what we observe as a phenomenon where seemingly smart, educated and successful individuals fail to be able to critically think before either acting or opening their mouth in streams of irrationality. Over the years we hear from our readers and participants in our workshops that some of the worst leaders they have encountered or worked for were inconsistent. One day it's one thing, the next day another reaction seemingly with no continuity or common/business sense. They lack the ability to critically assess or think through issues, and they come across as irrational and reactive.

## Fire, Ready, Aim

In the ideal world we would be carefully thinking through problems or issues before reaching a conclusion or action. Of course, on minor issues, the thought process would be short and sweet. In other words, our process would be **Ready, Aim, Fire**. Put another way it would be Think before you Act or Think before you Speak. How many of us, in this instant communication world, think first? Do you really think before you respond to an email or a post? Do you really think before you respond to a conversation you are having on a sensitive subject?

What has brought us to this reactionary way of functioning? Is it a perceived need for instant response? Is it simply laziness and not wanting to spend time thinking? Is it the pressure of our new electronic world where everything is instant information? The answer is probably a combination of all these and a myriad other reasons. We are truly in a different age from what we grew up with. Smart phones, tablets, computers give us access to information and to other people right away. No longer do we need to wait to meet with people or read a newspaper. If I can contact someone instantly or get information instantly then I perceive that I need to respond instantly. It is this perception of the need for speed that “forces” us to react without first thinking through a response. That need for instant reaction carries through in the rest of our lives. It’s commonplace for some to react, with minimal thought electronically, thereby creating similar behaviors elsewhere in our lives. This can be dangerous in our personal interactions and in our business lives. **Fire, Ready, Aim** can be devastating in a business situation. Leaders in a business organization, regardless of what type of organization, are expected and paid to make careful decisions that are consistent with the goals of the organization. **Fire, Ready, Aim** may be successful on occasions but in the long run will be detrimental to the health of an organization. We need to return to thinking before reacting!

### Decisional Consistency

There are many negative impacts from reactionary decision making but, since we are focusing on organizational leadership, one in particular we want to highlight is decisional consistency. If a leader is routinely reacting without first carefully thinking decisions through it will lead to decisional inconsistency. As we noted above, the perceived worst leaders are those who are inconsistent.

This issue of consistency, or inconsistency has an internal perspective of which leaders must be aware. When a leader takes a particular stand on an issue, does that individual consider their own situation? For an example, when an individual takes a position, do they conduct sufficient and objective introspection such that their position (whether it be a professional position or other perspectives such as political, social, or organizational) does not conflict with the conditions that may have led to their particular present situation or to organizational goals? Or, do they react to the situation with **Fire, Ready, Aim**, based on some other more emotional factor, or even a lack of understanding of what they are reacting to? Are they consistent in their decisions; are they consistent in understanding those things that got them to where they are; are they consistent and objective enough to see things through different lenses, or even take a serious look in a mirror?

There are mechanisms to enhance learning, change behavior and ultimately produce meaningful outcomes. Regarding consistency, and critical thinking, we believe if a leader is willing to honestly assess their behavioral strengths and weaknesses such that they can learn more about themselves, they can seriously explore behaviors both good and not so good, then develop action plans to develop the good behaviors and change the not so good ones. We certainly do not want this to sound like a trivial exercise because the next big step is affecting positive outcomes. When we say

positive outcomes, we are really saying critical thinking leading to consistency in one’s behavior, communication and leadership decision-making. But the biggest follow-up activity is self-checking. It is easy to fall back into a rut. It is difficult to unlearn those not so good behaviors.

Perhaps the most important component here is a leader’s desire to take that tough look inward. It becomes even tougher if a leader is so convinced they have all the answers instantly that they discount the need for self-assessment and introspection. We truly believe if this lack of a desire to look inward is so strong, there will result a ripple effect where critical thinking cannot occur and the potential for the inward inconsistencies will never change.

Leaders who apply critical thinking before making decisions are going to be much more consistent and will more clearly show their organization a common direction and have much less confusion within the organization.

### Conclusion

The instant communications of our world today contribute to our current state of a lack of critical thinking. We are so attuned to instantly responding electronically that instant response becomes our default behavior.

There are undoubtedly many more questions than answers or we would not be in this situation. Why do people react before thinking? Why do intelligent people make outrageous statements time and again? Where did we seemingly lose the ability and desire to think things through before speaking or hitting the keyboard? Are there external pressures that cause this behavior? What is going on internally that makes us react before thinking? The questions become almost insurmountable. Hence, we were confounded on how to deal with this topic. We see this as the basis of critical thinking. Understanding, self-importance and fear play a significant part in how a leader may react. If one is not oriented, inclined, or accustomed to looking inward before engaging their mouth, or typing a response, they become dangerous to themselves, their reputation, their organization, and their future. As Ken Blanchard said years ago:

*“There is a difference between interest and commitment. When you’re interested in doing something, you do it only when it’s convenient. When you’re committed to something, you accept no excuses, only results.”*



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