



In this time and day, the age of **information abundance**, it seems even more important to **hone your critical thinking skills**. It seems that everyone and their grandmother writes a blog and contributes to Wikipedia. Everybody has an opinion on everything, which is shouted out loudly online. Whether they make mistakes, errors or can actually write doesn't seem to matter. So before you **make important decisions**, or **formulate a strategy** or a **well formed opinion activate your critical thinking**. At a time where we are all busy and seem to have a constant lack of time, it is more important than ever to **reflect**, to **research different sources of information** thoroughly and diligently and to **question our own bias**. Because then, and only then, can we form a rounded opinion and make a conscious choice of how we interact with our fellow human beings.

Critical thinking should also come to play in **executive decision-making**. Above all when you are a specialist with vertical knowledge it's important to question your own bias. It's beneficial to **diversify**, **explore new fields** and **understand**

other people's opinions. Leaders I work with are often stuck in a worldview that allows only for black and white thinking and omits the gray areas. They form a strong opinion based on their analytical understanding of the world and forget the wide range of nuances that exist in between. Admittedly that might be even more so the case as I work a lot with engineers, who display binary thinking at times. But we all get stuck in this binary mode sometimes. So it is crucial for us all to have a holistic view. Even more so as you climb up the ranks into a leadership position.

Early on in childhood we are encouraged to categorize and put everything into certain boxes to better understand the world. As a grown-up we should aim to get a wider perspective. To quote His Holiness the Dalai Lama: “**We must look at any given situation or problem** from the front and from the back, from the sides, and from top and the bottom, so **from at least six different angles.**”^[1] Of course we must. But do we? Too often we don't take the time to reflect on problems in depth.

Furthermore **we come with bias, assumptions and preformed opinions** without seeing the need to question and discuss those. There are no wrong questions, only different answers! It's good to have a good look at your own boxes every now and then and **examine the categories you filed information** under. Is the information still up to date? How do other people box the information away? What are the advantages of that different filing system? What do we have in common with our very different views of the situation?

In Kahneman's "Thinking, Fast and Slow"[2] he distinguishes between the **fast thinking**, which is **emotional, intuitive** and the **slow thinking** which is more **analytical** and deliberate. It's the second system that you need to activate to question your own cognitive bias and perceptions. So when you think to yourself that there is a right way of doing something or that this is how people should act or think is a very good time to activate that second system. In order to do just that you need to **slow down your thinking**, you need **time to reflect**.

Here is some questions that you might ask yourself in that process:

Am I truly listening?

What formed my existing beliefs?

Am I coming into this situation with an open mind?

What is my bias or preconception?

What triggered the strong opinion of whatever the subject is?

What other perspectives can be applied to the situation?

What else should I know about this?

When you listen to somebody and you start formulating a counter argument in your head, slow down your thinking, **put your thought on hold**, note it for later and **go back to full listening mode**. **Explore the other opinion from all angles**.

Ask non-directing and open-ended questions. Use your natural

curiosity to find out more about it. Instead of being in your own head, **be with the other person** and really **try to understand their point of view**. By all means, be critical, be questioning, but try not to lead the discussion in a certain direction. **Be open**, be **aware of your own assumptions** and be flexible enough to **question them**. Often.

If it's an important subject, decision or otherwise **meaningful to you go back to it later**. Do your homework. **Research and learn more about it**. Reflect on it in depth accounting for the new learned knowledge. Then discuss it with other people, bounce ideas around with them. Realize **there are usually plenty of angles to any given situation**, problem and subject. **Question your stand** and **form it anew**. Dive deep. That's the beauty of having access to all this information. **You can always learn more**.

Julia Atkinson is Executive Coach and Consultant with more than 8 years experience of living and working in China before taking her business to the US, Chicago. Prior to starting an executive development firm, Julia spent 10 years leading teams in the IT and Telecommunication industries. Julia can be reached at julia@atkinson-coaching.com, www.atkinson-coaching.com

[1] The Book of Joy, by Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, ISBN-10: 0399185046, The Eight Pillars Of Joy, 1 Perspective: There Are Many Different Angles

[2] Daniel Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow, ISBN-10:
0374533555