



Ethics, Critical Thinking, and Communications

Edited May 4, 2021

Introduction

“If you deliver good information, you’re relevant.”¹

It matters little how well we know a subject if we lack an ability to think critically about it, and effectively communicate the results of that thinking. Ethics underpin and are essential to being able to do these two things.

These three items – ethics, critical thinking, and communications – work together to resolve the issues that we confront.

The relationship of what I have so far mentioned is captured in this graphic.

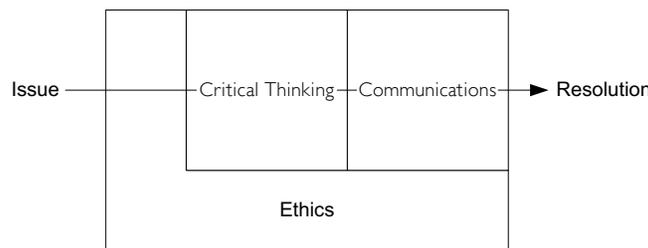


Figure 1 Relationships

This graphic exists within the context of the world around us; a world of constant and unpredictable change; a world changing with sometimes frightening speed; a world that, in some significant respects, seems to change not at all.

I write this note for two purposes.

1. To satisfy myself that my appreciation of the importance of the three items, and the way in which can think about and apply them is reasonable. Assuming satisfaction, then,
2. To provide ideas for consideration by others, especially my students, on the subject in hopes they will find something of value they can pack in their survival kit.

While I make some points about the three major areas, the purpose of this is note is not give an exhaustive treatment of its three major themes. Others have done that. I want to focus a bit more on their interrelationship and sequencing.

¹ J. M. McConnell, Today's Challenges. Tomorrow's Threats: Why America Needs an Agile and Robust Intelligence Community, 2008, Video, Harvard University Institute of Politics, Available: <http://www.iop.harvard.edu/Multimedia-Center/All-Videos/Today%27s-Challenges,-Tomorrow%27s-Threats-Why-America-Needs-an-Agile-and-Robust-Intelligence-Community>, January 23, 2009. McConnell was the United States of America Director of National Intelligence

Ethics

Ethics is that set of values that guides one in the conduct of life.

“Ethics is a major branch of philosophy, encompassing right conduct and good life. It is significantly broader than the common conception of analyzing right and wrong. A central aspect of ethics is ‘the good life’, the life worth living or life that is simply satisfying, which is held by many philosophers to be more important than moral conduct.”²

Ethics comprise the rules of execution for the SIDAL loop.³

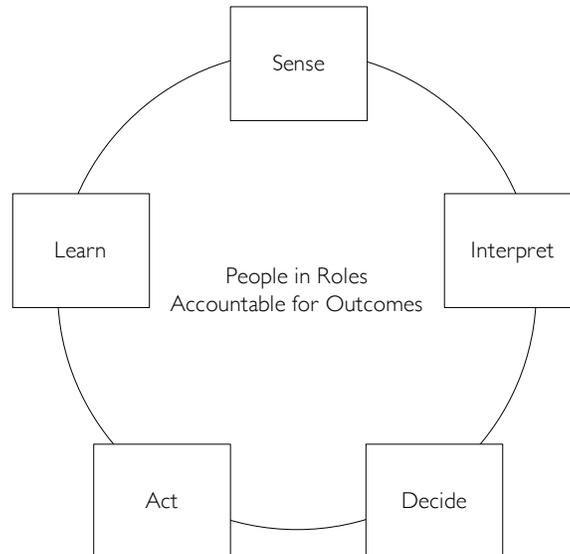


Figure 2 SIDAL Loop

Ethics controls what we sense, how we interpret the sensed, guides the decisions and subsequent actions, affects the process of learning, and the manner in which the behavior of the loop is modified.

Common sense tells us that there is not a single set of ethics that governs global behavior.

“Descriptive ethics is a value-free approach to ethics which examines ethics not from a top-down *a priori* perspective but rather observations of actual choices made by moral agents in practice. Some philosophers rely on descriptive ethics and choices made and unchallenged by a society or culture to derive categories, which typically vary by context. This can lead to situational ethics and situated ethics. These philosophers often view aesthetics, etiquette, and arbitration as more fundamental, percolating "bottom up" to imply the existence of, rather than explicitly prescribe, theories of value or of conduct. The study of descriptive ethics may include examinations of the following:

² Peter Singer, Practical Ethics, 2nd ed. (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics#cite_note-0 [January 14, 2009]

³ Adapted from Stephan H. Haeckel and Adrian J. Slywotzky, Adaptive Enterprise: Creating and Leading Sense-and-Respond Organizations (Harvard Business School Press, 1999).

- Ethical codes applied by various groups. Some consider aesthetics itself the basis of ethics – and a personal moral core developed through art and storytelling as very influential in one's later ethical choices.
- Informal theories of etiquette which tend to be less rigorous and more situational. Some consider etiquette a simple negative ethics, i.e. where can one evade an uncomfortable truth without doing wrong? One notable advocate of this view is Judith Martin ("Miss Manners"). According to this view, ethics is more a summary of common-sense social decisions.
- Practices in arbitration and law, e.g. the claim that ethics itself is a matter of balancing "right versus right," i.e. putting priorities on two things that are both right, but which must be traded off carefully in each situation.
- Observed choices made by ordinary people, without expert aid or advice, who vote, buy, and decide what is worth valuing. This is a major concern of sociology, political science, and economics.

Applied ethics is a discipline of philosophy that attempts to apply ethical theory to real-life situations. The discipline has many specialized fields, such as bioethics and business ethics.”⁴

The ethics that governs our behavior at the Metropolitan Opera is likely to be different than that which governs our behavior at the New York Mets.

House and Javidan suggest to us that ethics is a function of culture.⁵

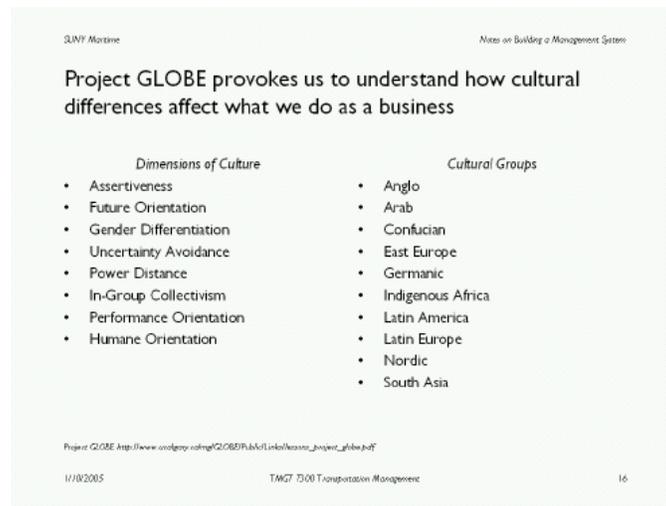


Figure 3 Dimensions of Culture

Again, common sense suggests to us that this is true.

⁴ Wikipedia, "Ethics," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics#cite_note-0 [January 14, 2009]

⁵ Mansour Javidan and Robert J. House, "Cultural Acumen for the Global Manager: Lessons from Project Globe," *Organizational Dynamics* 29.4 (2001).

This, of course, complicates matters if we operate on a global scale. How do we apply ethics across the spectrum of cultures and situations?

“There’s no such thing as business ethics – there’s only ethics. People try to use one set of ethics for their professional life, another for their spiritual life, and still another at home with their family. That gets them into trouble. Ethics is ethics. If you desire to be ethical, you live by one standard across the board.”⁶

But is that practical?

"When in Rome, do as the Romans do" advises people to adapt to the culture of places they visit. On the other hand, how do we square this advice with, for example, such US regulations as the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 and The Foreign Corrupt Practices Act of 1977 which may, in fact, prohibit acting as “the Romans do?”

I, for one, don’t see *uber ethics*. There is, as it were, no “one ring” to guide all ethics.

However, I don’t believe we can leave it at that. One cannot be without ethics. There ought to (must?) be a set of values that guides one in the conduct of life.

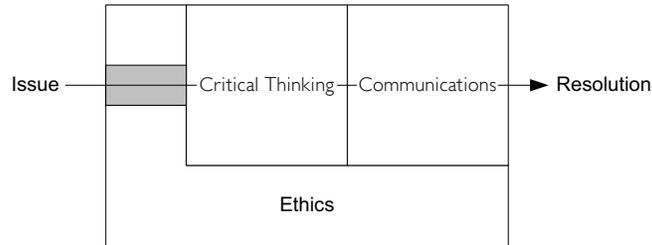


Figure 4 Filtering Issues

Ethics becomes a filter whereby we select those issues for consideration. In American business, for example, the filter is adjusted by custom and by law to exclude consideration of bribes. This is not the case in other countries.

The filter is under constant change depending upon the situation.⁷

The tenor of this note so far has been one of personal ethics. Organizational ethics also exist.

Consider the business configuration.⁸

⁶ John C. Maxwell, Ethics 101: What Every Leader Needs to Know, 1st Center Street ed. (New York: Center Street, 2003).

⁷ The Information Awareness Office (IAO) was established by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), the research and development agency of the United States Department of Defense, in January 2002 in response to the September 2001 terrorism attacks in the US. This is an example of how the filter is shaped by events.

⁸ James Drogan, Thinking About the Business Configuration, 2007, Available: <http://jmsdrngn.squarespace.com/storage/Thinking%20About%20the%20Business%20Configuration.pdf>, February 28, 2007.



Figure 5 Business Configuration

The notion of organizational ethics is captured by values in Figure 5. In this reference values are defined as

“Fundamental elements, or a set of beliefs which lie behind Corp as an organization (e.g., "Quality and safety are dominant principles in all we do," Respect for the Individual"). Other examples include the Nicene Creed and the Bill of Rights of the United States of America. Values should be simply stated, readily understood, and evident in the conviction, attitude and actions of all employees.”

IBM, for example, determined that its actions will be driven by these values:⁹

- Dedication to every client's success
- Innovation that matters, for our company and for the world
- Trust and personal responsibility in all relationships

I think it fair to say that IBM’s values not only determine what issues they will consider, but also the way they will be considered. It is this idea that I have tried to depict in Figure 1 and Figure 4.

There is a considerable amount of additional material available from a variety of sources about ethics. Two of my favorites are (Costa) and (Maxwell).

⁹ IBM, Our Values at Work on Being an IBMer, Available: <http://www.ibm.com/ibm/values/us/>, January 14, 2009.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a well-established process for identifying and thinking about issues and is strongly related to the notion of systems thinking.

I imagine that I practiced this sort of thinking beginning in my childhood, received formal training in the subject at various times during my IBM career and, in 1992, attended a class taught by PDN Ltd. about consulting problem solving.

Special thanks are due PDN for their gracious permission to use material from their publication, *Consulting Problem Solving*.¹⁰

I had previously written a note¹¹ on critical thinking. This note forms the basis of much of this section.

Time, by and large, has emerged as the frontline of competitive battles.

SUNY Maritime

A Note on Fact-Based Hypothesis-Driven Thinking

Characteristics of problem solving in the business world.

- Time to solution is critical
 - “I believe that we’re about to witness what may turn out to be the last competitive frontier business will see. It’s going to be a war over the one priceless resource. Time. And when it comes, trust may turn out to be the best investment anyone’s made.”

Source: Jim Kelly, CEO of UPS, Remarks to the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco & Oakland Chamber of Commerce, February 23, 2000.

- But,
 - Problem definition can be imprecise
 - Data is not always available or relevant
- So, one needs some method of dealing with these divergent vectors

6/3/2005

A Note on Fact-Based Hypothesis-Driven Thinking

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Figure 6 Characteristics of Problem Solving in the Business World

Time draws one of the boundaries defining the space in which business decisions need to be made. In the early years of this millennium Establish/Herbert W. Davis Company said:

‘Our mission is to use our knowledge of supply chain management and information technology to help companies achieve their business goals. In these past few months, we find that the definitions of short, medium, and long term now mean something completely different:

¹⁰ Tim Reeder and Joanne Russell, eds., *Consulting Problem Solving* (London: PDN Ltd, 1990). Contact details for PDN Ltd. will be found in the appendix of this note.

¹¹ James Drogan, *A Note on Fact-Based Hypothesis-Driven Thinking* 2005, Available: <http://jmsdrgn.squarespace.com/storage/A%20Note%20on%20Fact-Based%20Hypothesis-Driven%20Thinking.pdf>, January 29, 2007.

Short term used to mean within the next six months. It now means "next Monday."

Medium term used to mean six months to a year. It now means "after next Monday."

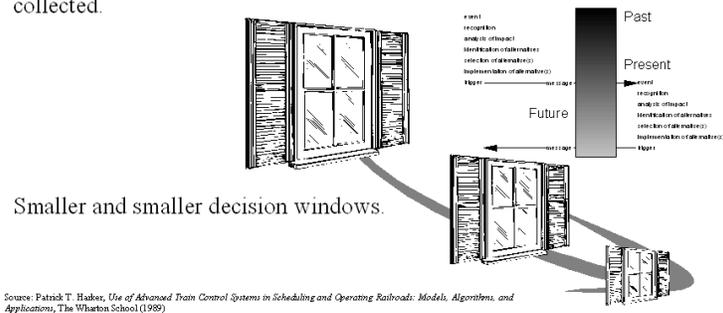
Long term used to mean two to five years out. It now means "over the next six months."

The window available in which decisions must be made is continually becoming smaller.

Information Technology Enabled Business Value

Global Positioning Systems³

Sophisticated, very responsive decision support systems are required to extract value from data that is more precise, accurate and frequently collected.



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Figure 7 Decision Window

The decision window comprises:

1. The **event** that occurs.
2. The **recognition** that the event has occurred.
3. The **analysis of the impact**.
4. The **identification of alternative response** to the event.
5. The **selection of an alternative response**.
6. The **implementation of the alternative**.
7. The **trigger** the alternative generates upon implementation. This can be thought of as a message which generates another event.

Time compromises the ability to execute these steps with confidence. Therefore, a way needs to be found to reach decisions within this constraint of time.

The business person needs a solution that is quickly arrived at, understandable, acceptable, and can be acted on.

- An undisciplined gathering and analysis of data is likely not to yield a satisfactory result.
- Rather, one should postulate the end result and then plan carefully to investigate and challenge the postulation or "hypothesis".
- Real job planning starts with hypothesis of what the answer is. Hypotheses provide:
 - A unifying concept
 - A point of departure for working backwards to establishing plans for fact gathering and analysis
 - A reference point for identifying and assessing the impact of shifts in the focus of the work
 - A basis for setting priorities

Adapted from PDN, *Consulting Problem Solving*, 1990, The Professional Development Network

Figure 8 Planning the Resolution of an Issue

One cannot simply engage in data gathering without a purpose. Too much time is wasted and too much effort is ill spent.

Start with the end in mind. Determine the critical issues that need to be investigated to reach the end. Identification of the issues will recall key hypotheses.

SUNY Maritime A Note on Fact-Based Hypothesis-Driven Thinking

The hypothesis

hy·poth·e·sis (hi-pōth'ī-sis) 

n., *pl.* *-ses* (-sēz)

1. A tentative explanation for an observation, phenomenon, or scientific problem that can be tested by further investigation.
2. Something taken to be true for the purpose of argument or investigation; an assumption.
3. The antecedent of a conditional statement.

[Latin, subject for a speech, from Greek *hypothesis*, proposal, supposition, from *hypotithenai*; *hypothe-*, to suppose : *hypo-*, *hypo-* + *tithenai*, to place.]

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition Copyright © 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.

- Test the credibility of a hypothesis with a cause-effect statement linking the hypothesis with the problem.
- Identify the questions necessary to prove/disprove the hypothesis.
- Gather the data and perform the analysis.
- The analysis leads to findings (i.e., groups of related facts), conclusions and recommendations.

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Figure 9 Hypothesis 1

It is these hypotheses that must then be investigated to resolve the issues.

Hypotheses emerge from a disciplined thinking process.

- What are the objectives of the assignment? For example,
 - Develop information providing a deeper understanding of a situation.
 - Provide information in a structure upon which decisions may be made.
- What is the nature of the output from the assignment? For example,
 - Computer model.
 - Oral presentation.
- What are the issues that must be considered? For example,
 - 8,000 TEU container ships cannot pass through the Panama Canal.
 - Common view of data.
- Then come the hypotheses. For example,
 - Booking containers to ships that can pass through the Panama Canal will minimize our transportation costs.
 - A system for the reconciliation of various views of data will be required.

Figure 10 Finding Hypotheses

This process I have briefly described is summarized in the following chart.¹²

¹² Figure 8 through Figure 11 are based on Reeder and Russell, eds., Consulting Problem Solving.

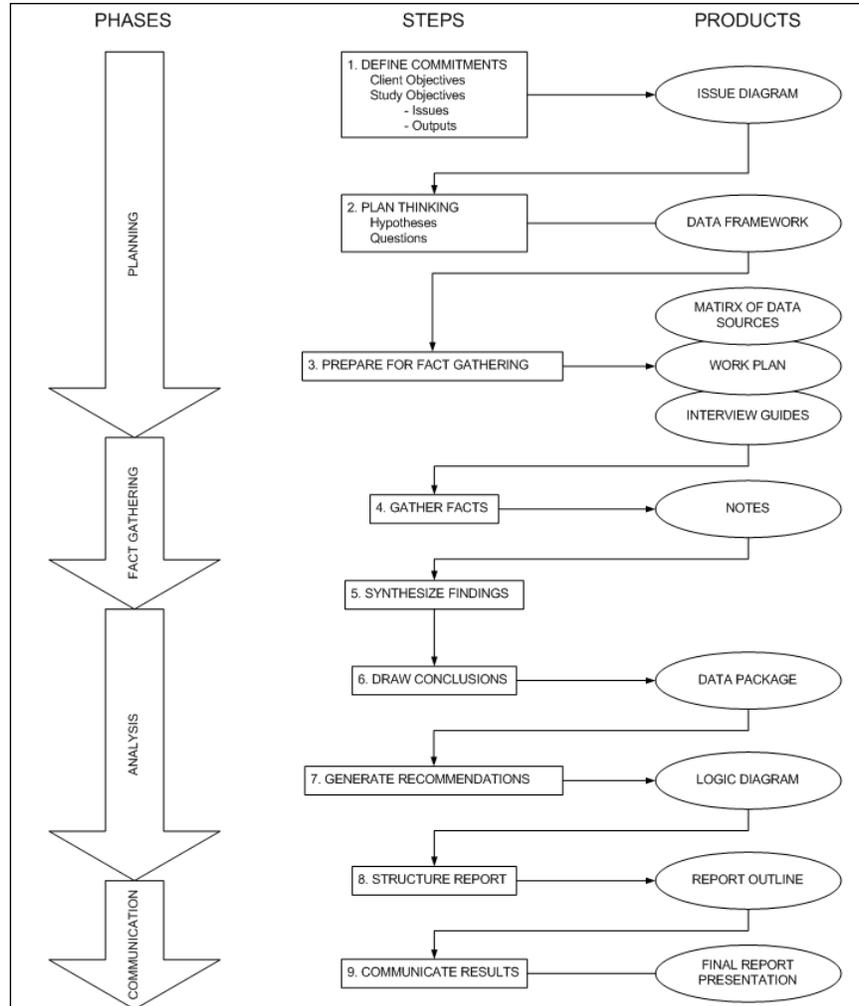


Figure 11 Fact-based Hypothesis-driven Thinking

Searching the Internet with the phrase "fact-based hypothesis-driven" will provide links to further information and different points of view on his approach to problem solving.

The question one, especially the novice, faces is that of understanding how to start the process of critical thinking. The PDN document does this quite well, but I'm not sure it's available in the public domain. However, an elegant little book, (Ellet), is available and I recommend it highly.

This section closes out with some comment the process of critical thinking based on my own experiences supplemented by relevant comment from Ellet.

One is confronted by an issue. For example, "Why is the percentage of on-time deliveries falling for deliveries of microinjected fallibies to customers in the upper reaches of Maine?" This may be all one knows about the issue to begin with.

Or one may have a more elaborate description of the case such as the 17-page case from the Harvard Business School, “TNT Ltd.’s Logistics Services in Asia (A): The Strategy.”¹³

Or, if one is faced with the issue of merger and acquisition, all relevant documentation from a firm.

Ellet says,

“Case study students need two distinct sets of skills. First, they need to be able to analyze a case, to give it meaning in relation to its key issues or questions that have been asked about it. The goal is to come to conclusion congruent with the reality of the case, taking into account its gaps and uncertainties. Second, students have to be able to communicate their thinking effectively.”¹⁴

To that I would add that a dose of healthy skepticism combined with curiosity is also a good thing. One ought to want to get beneath the surface of the case, to find out what’s really going on (the root causes).

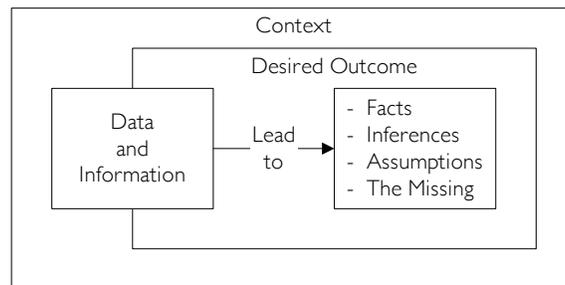


Figure 12 The Initial Reading

The initial reading of the data and information in the case leads one to a list of facts, inferences, and assumptions. Keep in mind that relevance is important. The desired outcome and the context should serve as filters.

Read with a pen or pencil and paper at hand. Write everything down.

Now about The Missing.

“Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?”

"To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

"The dog did nothing in the night-time."

"That was the curious incident”¹⁵

¹³ Michael Y. Yoshin and Carin-Isabel Knoop, Tnt Ltd.’S Logistics Services in Asia (a): The Strategy (Harvard Business School, 1997).

¹⁴ William Ellet, The Case Study Handbook : How to Read, Discuss, and Write Persuasively About Cases (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 2007). p 6

¹⁵ “Silver Blaze,” Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, The Complete Sherlock Holmes (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company).

Be aware of what, in your experience, is important in cases such as this, but is not mentioned. Your ability to do this comes with experience, but the lack of experience should not prevent you from asking, “Why is nothing said about...?”

Write everything down.

Then read the case again.

This first step is arguably the most important. Without a clear understanding of the case and the desired outcome then the odds that the subsequent effort will yield a result of value become smaller.

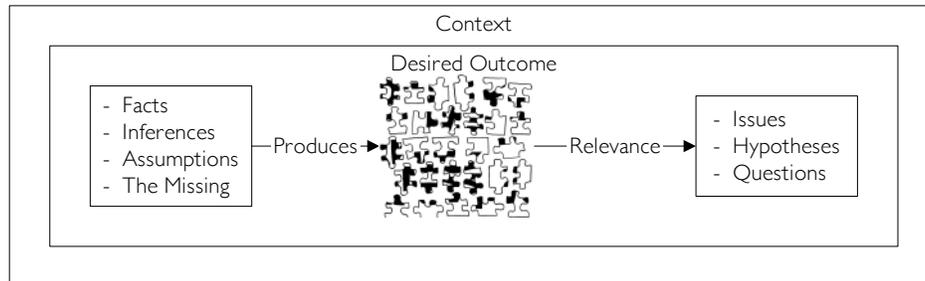


Figure 13 The Initial Analysis

The initial reading will produce “pieces of the puzzle.”¹⁶ These pieces will 1.) likely not be sufficiently complete to produce the desired picture, and 2.) likely include pieces that seem to have no part to play in producing the desired picture.

From this set of “stuff” one begins to build a meta-structure to guide one’s thinking. This meta-structure comprises:

1. **Issues:** These are items the understanding of which is likely to be of significance in producing the desired outcome. For example, suppose the situation being investigated is the potential for growth in a particular market. Issues might include buying behavior, or disposable income, or the age of the population.
2. **Hypotheses:** These emerge from the issues and are provisional statements that could account for the relevance of the issues. An admittedly simple example of a hypothesis is that the lack of disposable income will result in low market opportunity.
3. **Questions:** These are intended to prove or disprove the hypotheses. For example, what is the relationship between disposable income and market opportunity?

What we’re looking for are items and relationships that are relevant to producing the desired outcome.

¹⁶ <http://www.theinventioneers.com/Puzzle%20Pieces%20from%20The%20Inventioneers%20smaller.jpg> [January 20, 2009]

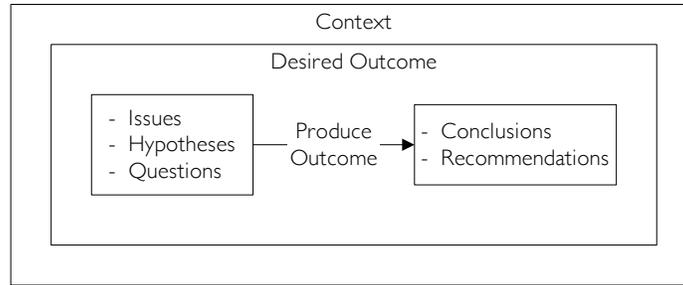


Figure 14 The Initial Outcome

One cannot and must not analyze forever. The sponsor of the case is expecting an outcome. This usually consists of two parts:

1. **Conclusions:** Think of these as hypotheses that have been proven to be significant. For example, the unexpected gain in weight is due to the consumption of two gallons of Eddy’s Butter Pecan ice cream per week. Your sponsor will also be looking for ideas on the risks and rewards associated with not resolving the hypotheses.
2. **Recommendations:** Here is where you answer the question of what should be done next. Think in terms of what, who, how, why, when, and where. Again, risk and rewards need to be considered.

There is an implication in foregoing that the pass through critical thinking is linear and perhaps even one pass and done. This is far from reality.

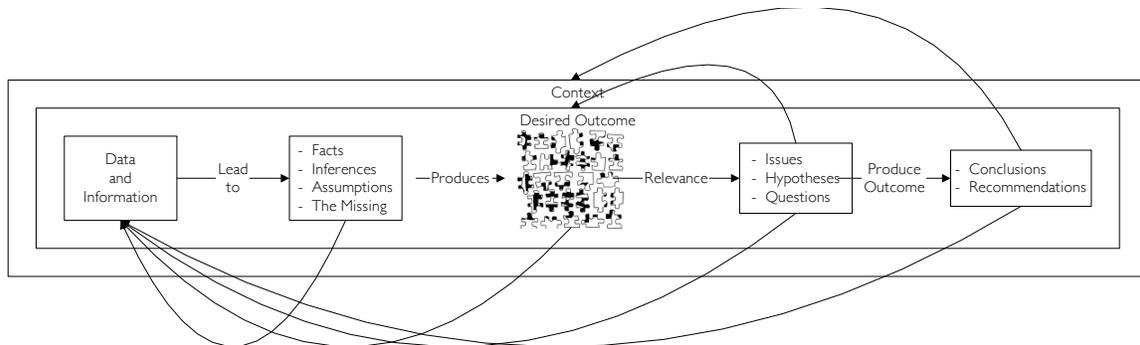


Figure 15 The Whole of Critical Thinking

In Figure 15 I have brought the parts previously discussed together. The process of critical thinking creates new data, information, and knowledge. The new informs the old in the sense that one’s view of, say, the initial set of data and information may change. This is represented by the feedback loops introduced into this diagram. In certain situations, even the desired outcome and context can be changed by the growing understanding.

That is, critical thinking is an iterative process.

Your look at a case needs to consider the importance of time. For example, an issue of significance today may not be of significance tomorrow regardless of whether any action is taken by the sponsor. Perhaps, therefore the issue can, with little risk, remain unaddressed. Consider analysis within a relevant life span.

Ethics needs to underlie and inform all of your work on the case. For example, in certain situations, especially in America, questions regarding gender and age are unacceptable.

I've already referred you to (Reeder and Russell) and (Ellet) for additional information on the subject of critical thinking. Inasmuch as critical thinking is closely related to systems thinking I also want to refer you to (Sterman) and (Senge). A small note I use in my system design and control course, "An Introduction to System Design and Control,"¹⁷ may also prove to be of some value.

Communications

The ethics are impeccable and the critical thinking without equal. Now comes the third, equally hard, and perhaps most important undertaking – communications.

Your work has been synthesized into a set of conclusions and recommendations. You now must choose what and how to present this material to the person initially requesting that you investigate the situation.

What do you do?

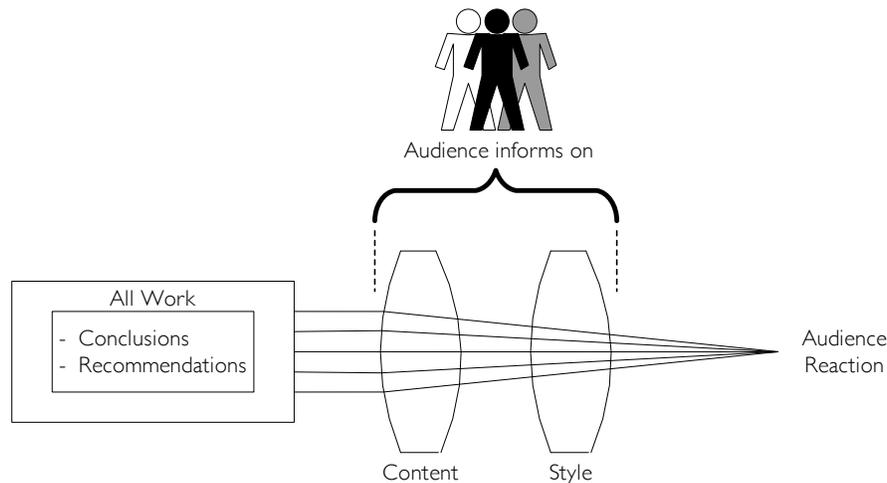


Figure 16 Producing Results

The task is to cause the desired audience reaction from the communication of your conclusions and recommendations.

How do you wish the audience to react? Oft times we are looking for action. Funding for a project, say, or a high grade in a course, or the stimulation of debate, or maybe the forestalling of action. One needs to be quite clear as the desired outcome for it shapes what (content) will be communicated and how (style).

It's necessary that you have a very good understanding of the audience, their likes and dislikes, agendas, power and influence in the organization, allies and enemies. The audience informs you as to what should be selected from your portfolio of work and how

¹⁷ James Drogan, An Introduction to System Design and Control, 2008, Lecture Note, SUNY Maritime College, Available: <http://jmsdrngn.squarespace.com/storage/An%20Introduction%20to%20System%20Design%20and%20Control.pdf>, July 8, 2008.

it should be presented. It's helpful if you can find examples of work authored by your audience to use as models for your presentation.

The effort has likely been conducted by a team. Tasks have been assigned, independent work has been done, but the communications of your results should have a structure and consistency that integrates all into a seamless whole. My advice is that, if you are required to give an oral presentation it should be done by a single person – your best speaker – unless there is a really good reason to do otherwise. If producing a written report, the final edit should be done by your best writer. You don't wish your audience to spend effort adapting to multiple styles.

Keep in mind the following principles for communication:

1. The grammar and syntax are understood.
2. The information communicated is relevant.
3. The medium of communication is acceptable.
4. There is a desire to communicate.
5. There is confirmation of understanding.

If you use graphics, pictures, tables, and the like, be sure they are relevant to your argument and, if in written communication, fully supported by the surrounding narrative. Avoid graphics, pictures, tables, and the like, as well as elaborate formatting, if these do not contribute to understanding. The audience is not interested in fancy wrapping paper, but the contents of the package.

Understand and respect limits set by your audience. For example, if you have 20 minutes to make an oral presentation, stay close to that; if 25 pages have been allocated for your report, stay close to that.

Learn to read your audience when making an oral presentation. This read will tell you whether you have captured their attention. If you haven't, then you need to change. I one time had a colleague write me;

“If no one else will compliment you on your presentation, I will.

It took most of the morning and was about what we expected of you.”

Find examples of written reports and oral communications that have worked well. Study them and learn.

Be cognizant of the potential for cultural issues to arise in communications. Words, gestures, colors, and graphics which may seem innocuous to you may well be received in a different manner by your audience.

I have found the output of Project GLOBE^{18 19} instructive on these matters. Think of the implications on communications of the dimensions of culture and cultural groups as defined by Project GLOBE.

A further look at the culture

<i>Dimensions of Culture</i>	<i>Cultural Groups</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assertiveness• Future Orientation• Gender Differentiation• Uncertainty Avoidance• Power Distance• In-Group Collectivism• Performance Orientation• Humane Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anglo• Arab• Confucian• East Europe• Germanic• Indigenous Africa• Latin America• Latin Europe• Nordic• South Asia

Project GLOBE http://www.ucalgary.ca/mg/GLOBE/PublicLinks/lessons_project_globe.pdf

4/15/2007

GBTT 351 C Sp6 International Logistics

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Figure 17 Project GLOBE Summary²⁰

Ours is a world where globalization is an increasingly powerful force. To ignore it is to put ourselves at an unnecessary disadvantage.

Generational issues may also arise that affect the communication. For example, consider SMS (Short Message Service) versus E-Mail. Based on experiences at the *Executives on Campus Freshman Seminar for Learning Communities*, Baruch College, October 2006, it was clear that Baby Boomers were comfortable with e-mail while Millennials were comfortable with SMS²¹ I refer you back to the first item under principles of communication on page 15 for additional guidance.

Your task is to find a way to communicate with your audience at the level they will understand.

Business communication is different from academic communication. Rarely did, or do, I find business communication written in the style of academic theses and dissertations.

¹⁸ Javidan and House, "Cultural Acumen for the Global Manager: Lessons from Project Globe."

¹⁹ Robert J. House and Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research Program., Culture, Leadership, and Organizations : The Globe Study of 62 Societies (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2004).

²⁰ James Drogan, 1. Introduction to the Course and to International Physical Distribution Systems, ppt file, [April 15, 2007]

²¹ James Drogan, Another Look at Communication Effectiveness, 2006, Available: <http://jmsdrgn.squarespace.com/storage/another%20look%20at%20communication%20effectiveness.pdf>, January 28, 2007.

Ethics, as mentioned several times before in this note, should also underlie your communications.

Other than (Reeder and Russell) and (Ellet) I have few books in my library that deal with communications. There is, however, an enormous amount of material available that deals with this issue. For example, a google of “business communication” made while writing this note turns up a bit over 52 million hits on this subject.

Review what business men and women are reading. How does the Wall Street Journal, or Barons, or the Financial Times present information? What are the best-selling business books and how are they structured? Who are people in demand in the business community as speakers and how do they practice their craft?

Coda

This has been a quick, high-level journey through ethics, critical thinking, and communications.

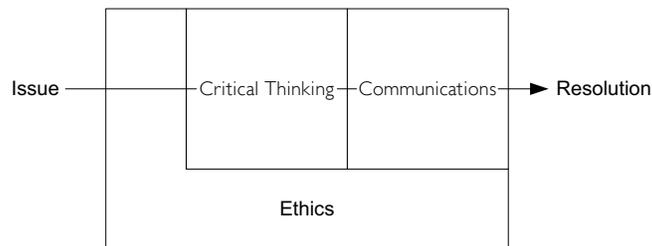


Figure 18 Relationships

Rather than an in-depth treatment of each of these matters I have focused more on their interrelationship and sequencing. I’ve also brought into play my experiences and pointed you towards other sources.

My sense is that if one lacks knowledge, skills, and experience in ethics, critical thinking, and communications, then other qualities one may possess may be seriously compromised.

James Drogan
January 24, 2009

Appendix

Contact details for PDN Ltd.

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Bibliography

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