think smarter

Critical Thinking to Improve Problem-Solving and Decision-Making Skills

Michael Kallet

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To my dad, Sidney Kallet, who thought, and thought well.
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Thinking is the process that every human being uses to solve problems, make decisions, generate new ideas, and be creative. The goal of Think Smarter is to answer the question “How exactly do we get better at problem solving, decision making, and creativity?” Actually, the question is “If thinking is what we use to solve problems, then how do we improve our thinking with respect to solving problems?” The inspiration to write this book came from years of helping others answer that question.

People often ask me if it’s truly possible to teach people to be smarter. The answer depends on how you define smarter. If it means increasing intelligence quotient (IQ) points, then the answer is probably not. But if becoming smarter means applying your IQ in a way that produces more successful problem solving and better decisions, then the answer is absolutely yes.

Critical thinking isn’t about making people smarter; it’s about using a set of tools and techniques to think in a more effective way. Critical thinking won’t increase IQ points, but it will help people apply whatever level of intelligence they have in a way that produces higher-quality solutions. It raises the bar for everyone and improves both individuals’ and organizations’ overall performance.

Why I Wrote This Book

I had enjoyed a successful career in software development from the beginning of the personal computer (PC) revolution and then worked as an operations and technology executive in the rocketing Internet space. Then, in 2003, I found myself in yet another fast-changing business. I was a senior executive in a telecommunications company, sitting in a boardroom with
20 other executives during the first of a series of strategy sessions to create a five-year plan. A question was raised: What did we want to be five years from then? After a few jokes about running a beach and golf resort in Hawaii, the conversations began to coalesce around becoming a billion-dollar company. A very interesting line graph was drawn. Our revenue had been on the decline; the graph was decreasing through the then-current $400 million per year revenue but then made an abrupt upward slope to $1 billion. There were no discussions about being the best telecommunications company, developing unique solutions, having the fastest network, being the best in customer satisfaction, or being a profitable, great place to work. Rather, we determined that if we were to be a billion-dollar company, we would need to sell so much of this, sell so much of that, and sell it in this number of cities. There weren’t any conversations about what we would have to do differently to change from a decreasing revenue stream to a very significant and aggressively growing one.

That was the moment when I sat back in my chair and asked myself a question: “I wonder if anyone in this room, including myself, is actually doing any real thinking?” Soon after that meeting, I started to think about thinking.

After doing a bit of research, I determined that there always seemed to be two ingredients present for successful businesses. The first was persistence. Companies that consistently do well embrace a statement I like: “There’s always a way.” The second ingredient was quality thinking: real, hard, roll-up-the-sleeves, not-taking-anything-for-granted thinking. I’ve noticed throughout my own career that when people really think about something and ask questions—even when they know the answer—they tend to come up with new solutions to a problem, arrive at a new decision, or realize an innovation. It doesn’t happen every time, but it happens often enough.

Although persistence is an important ingredient in success, I decided to focus my work primarily on thinking. In the autumn of 2004, I started a company I named HeadScratchers, LLC. The goal was to help people—not just executives, but individuals, supervisors, and managers as well—become better headscratchers, that is, better problem solvers, decision makers, and innovators. I wanted HeadScratchers to take a different approach from the
traditional academic focus of logic, inference, and Boolean algebra many
other thinking consultants offered. This was about business problem solv-
ing, in the real world, for people who needed a few good tools in their
toolbox. Our target audience was business people who don’t have the time
or interest to understand the science of left brain/right brain, neurochemi-
cal stuff. The goal was to provide, train, and coach business people with
skills they could use, on their own or with others, to be more thoughtful
when tackling problems, making decisions, or innovating. This meant train-
ing with an interactive workshop, so HeadScratchers became a training,
coaching, and interactive workshop company, focused 100 percent on the
business use for critical thinking. In 2006, we rolled out our first workshop,
“Critical Thinking for Problem Solving and Decision Making.”

Whom Is This Book For?

You might be wondering whether this book is worth your time. Consider
this: thinking is the foundation of everything we do. Whether you’re a
novice thinker or an accomplished problem solver and decision maker, is
it possible that you might pick up one idea, one technique, or one tool to
use in your life—which would potentially lead you to look at an issue, goal,
problem, or decision in a different way? If yes, then this book is for you. As
a result, you might avoid an error, recognize an opportunity, or accomplish
something a little faster or with higher quality.

Why You Should Read a Book Like This

Of course, I am biased and think you should read this book. To be hon-
est, you would get something out of reading any book on problem solving,
decision making, and critical thinking. Here’s why: when you read a book
related to thinking, it will result in your thinking, possibly about what you
are reading related to thinking. In doing this, you will most likely pick up at
least one thing, one idea, or one exercise you can incorporate in your day-
to-day thinking. Your thinking will be different and improved.

So, why this book? Think Smarter isn’t focused on theory. Rather, it
contains real-world tools, techniques, and exercises, which makes a huge