



Becoming Aware - Mentoring and Critical Thinking By Ann Rolfe

Being critical is often taken to mean giving negative, often uncomplimentary feedback about another's work or ideas in ways that can destroy motivation and diminish self-image. This definition is an unfortunate, if sometimes accurate, description of criticism.

Critical thinking however is quite different. Stephen Brookfield, in *Developing Critical Thinkers* describes it as involving reflecting on what you are doing, why you are doing it and what alternatives you might consider for better outcomes.

Critical thinking requires that you identify and challenge the underlying, often unconscious, assumptions on which attitudes, beliefs and decisions are founded. It is a process that allows you to imagine a better future and explore ways of achieving your vision.

Critical thinking is a collaboration of the head and the heart. The logic and emotion that shape personal beliefs are respected. Cultural differences are accepted. However, the bases of preformed opinions are scrutinised. Critical thinking is an opportunity to connect with and strengthen your core values and develop the ability to make informed choices about what you believe.

This kind of thinking is best facilitated in the company of an objective, reflective listener - a mentor.

Using the acronym AWARE to guide the conversation, mentors can facilitate conversations that enable mentorees to become:

Alive to possibilities, opening their minds so that by thinking critically they are able to arrive at their own judgment rather than conforming to the judgment of others;

Wary of universal truth, simplistic solutions, stereotypes, generalisations and givens. Rather, adopting a healthy skepticism, curiosity and a questioning approach;

Active in their analysis of information. Instead of passive acceptance, intelligently assessing their own beliefs and those of others, examining theories and distinguish facts from assumptions;

Reflective, taking an objective position to look at what, why and how they (and others) think and act in particular ways. Examining old habits of both mind and behaviour to see if they serve and deliver desired outcomes;

Exploratory, examining alternatives. Envisioning ideal future scenarios and seeking new and different approaches that may achieve them.

A mentor can lead the critical thinking process ensuring that it retains a positive focus, making it safe for the mentoree to "think out loud", prompting critique, not criticism of the current reality and consideration of future possibilities by respecting both the rational and emotional components of decision-making. That's how mentoring works.