

UMUC Business and Executive Programs Podcasts
Essential Competencies for the 21st Century Manager

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Podcast Title: Critical Thinking: Understanding the "Why" of Complex Business Problems

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Hartigan: Hi everyone and welcome to the third Podcast in our series Essential Competencies for the 21st Century Manager--a weekly Podcast that features discussions and interviews with industry experts, up-to-date news about UMUC's Business and Executive Programs, and other events of interest to students of business. Thank you for joining us. I'm Rosemary Hartigan, Professor and Director, Business and Executive Programs, and course manager for the first seminar in the MBA Program, *The Role of Managers in Organizations and Society*. Today's topic is critical thinking, and I'm going to define it, discuss why it's core competency at UMUC and in our MBA curriculum, and why it's important to managers and leaders in today's organizations.

Confucius said that learning without thinking is useless. Critical thinking is a very fundamental skill that is increasingly recognized as vital to student learning and achievement, in all disciplines. UMUC's institutional definition of critical thinking is: "to demonstrate the use of analytical skills and reflective processing of information." Critical thinkers do not just accept everything they see, read, and hear at face value. They approach information from a particular mindset and attitude of asking questions, such as where does the information come from; what are the issues and conclusions; what are the motivations and values of the people or organizations supplying the information; is the information credible; is it supported by other sources; are there alternative conclusions? Critical thinking doesn't come naturally, it's an acquired skill and discipline that needs to be developed and practiced.

But, despite the importance of critical thinking, it's widely recognized as a major area of weakness for students across the United States. For this reason, UMUC has taken steps to make sure critical thinking is a major part of all programs, and we've begun to assess critical thinking across the university.

In 2005, the Center for Teaching and Learning at UMUC conducted a study to determine the critical thinking competency of undergraduate students at UMUC and similar universities across the country. The study found that less than five percent of these students achieved the highest rating of proficiency in critical thinking skills.

So, rather than assume that our MBA students come into our program equipped with well-honed critical thinking skills acquired from undergraduate studies, we make the more logical assumption that they do not. This is why in our MBA program, we take particular care to develop and reinforce the competency of critical thinking. As applied to the study of management, the MBA program defines critical thinking as "the ability to formulate clear, defensible ideas that result from analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information." A manager examines the key components of the core problem or issue.

Why is critical thinking particularly important for MBA students? I think Diane Ravitch, a U.S. educator, made an excellent point about the importance of critical thinking for managers way back in 1938 in a TIME magazine article when she said, "The person who knows 'how' will always have a job. The person who knows 'why' will always be his boss." As Professor Evanchik noted in the previous Podcast, a goal of MBA students is to broaden their

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management responsibilities. Critical thinking is one of the key cognitive skills that can help you acquire the ability to understand the "why" of new and complex management problems that will surely come across your desk with increasing frequency as you gain responsibility in your organization. As affirmed by our MBA Advisory Board of business and government leaders, one of the most valuable skills new MBAs can bring to their employers is the ability to identify, analyze, and solve problems. Managers need to be able to view an issue objectively, look at it from all sides, and effectively evaluate the pros and cons of taking a particular action. They need to understand why the problem occurred. They need to consider the ethical, legal, societal and financial impacts of decisions. They need to evaluate the information that's available and to determine what additional information is needed to be able to come to a reasonable conclusion. When there's a problem to be solved, you've heard the saying, "We've got to get to the bottom of this." Critical thinking is the mental tool that helps you do just that. In the MBA program, you'll learn methods and frameworks that will give you the ability to analyze information in a disciplined and effective way to help you come to the best possible solution. You'll also learn to recognize and overcome barriers to critical thinking such as common biases and fallacies. Armed with this valuable skill, you'll be able to make intelligent decisions and provide convincing reasons to support your decisions.

As an MBA student, your brain will be filled with a wealth of knowledge about business topics such as organizational theory and behavior, marketing, finance, operations, technology, global business, business strategy, business law, and business ethics. But, if you're like most people, you'll probably forget most of the factual information you learn in these courses shortly after they end; this is human nature. After all, we're not computers that can store and retrieve endless volumes of information. In addition, much information we obtain today is obsolete tomorrow. So, more important than simply storing up information, is the ability to acquire, analyze, and synthesize new knowledge--and that's what critical thinking is all about. It's a learned skill and unlike facts and theories, skills are something you don't forget. It's like riding a bicycle or swimming. It helps to practice regularly, but you always remember how to do it. Acquiring and improving your critical thinking skills and understanding the "why" of issues will continue to help you be a better manager and leader years after much of the knowledge you learned is forgotten or no longer useful.

I hope that you enjoyed this Podcast and find it helpful to know why critical thinking is important to managerial studies and why we focus on it in the UMUC MBA Program as a core competency.

The topic for the next episode in our Essential Competencies series is Information Literacy, which is defined as "the ability to formulate research questions, to access relevant and appropriate information resources, to evaluate the scholarly merits of sources, and to use information to support or refute research hypotheses." A manager knows how to use reference materials and possesses the research skills to effectively fulfill individual responsibilities. I'm sure you can see how information literacy and critical thinking go hand in hand. While you may be able to simply retrieve information without critical thinking, critical thinking is essential to digging in to get to the bottom of the issue, to formulate relevant research questions, evaluate the information that you find, and use that information effectively to support or refute assumptions.

We're very interested in your feedback on the relevancy of the material you hear in the Podcasts. Please contact Todd Cinani at tcinani@umuc.edu with any comments or suggestions you might have. His e-mail address is also on the main Business and Executive Programs department Web page, where you'll also find a transcript of this Podcast.

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Thank you very much for your kind attention and have a great day. Thank you.

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