Apply Critical Thinking Skills in a Team Environment

BSBCRT311

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Overview

This unit describes skills and knowledge required to apply critical thinking skills to generate solutions to workplace problems in a team environment.

The unit applies to individuals who are required to develop and extend their critical and creative thinking skills to different issues and situations. These individuals apply a range of problem solving, evaluation and analytical skills resolve workplace issues within a team context.

No licensing, legislative or certification requirements apply to this unit at the time of publication.

Learning Outcomes

1. Prepare to address workplace problems
2. Evaluate solutions for workplace problems
3. Finalise and review solution development

Assessment Project.

A large part of the assessment for your Certificate III in Business will involve forming a team to resolve problems. In addressing the *performance evidence* of individual units of study you may be required to;

- choose team members to work with
- hold meetings to discuss issues that are of concern to you and your team
- define those issues and develop criteria to evaluate options for resolving them
- use critical thinking skills to develop solutions to the option you chose to work with
- communicate with, and support, the team in the most effective way
- ensure that all legislative and ethical frameworks are observed and taken into consideration
- review the process undertaken to resolve the issue and suggest improvements.

The assessments in this unit may form part of the overall assessment process

Introduction

No matter what industry you are in, methods of "doing business" are common across most of them. There are certain skills and knowledge elements that are useful and, indeed, necessary in order to be successful.

One of these skills is the ability to think clearly and with a critical mind. Much time and effort can be wasted by jumping enthusiastically into an idea or exercising a strategy without giving it proper thought and thinking through the ramifications or exploring all the options available to you. There are always choices in every situation and the choices you make can either lead to success, problems or even failure if that choice is not based on solid foundations.
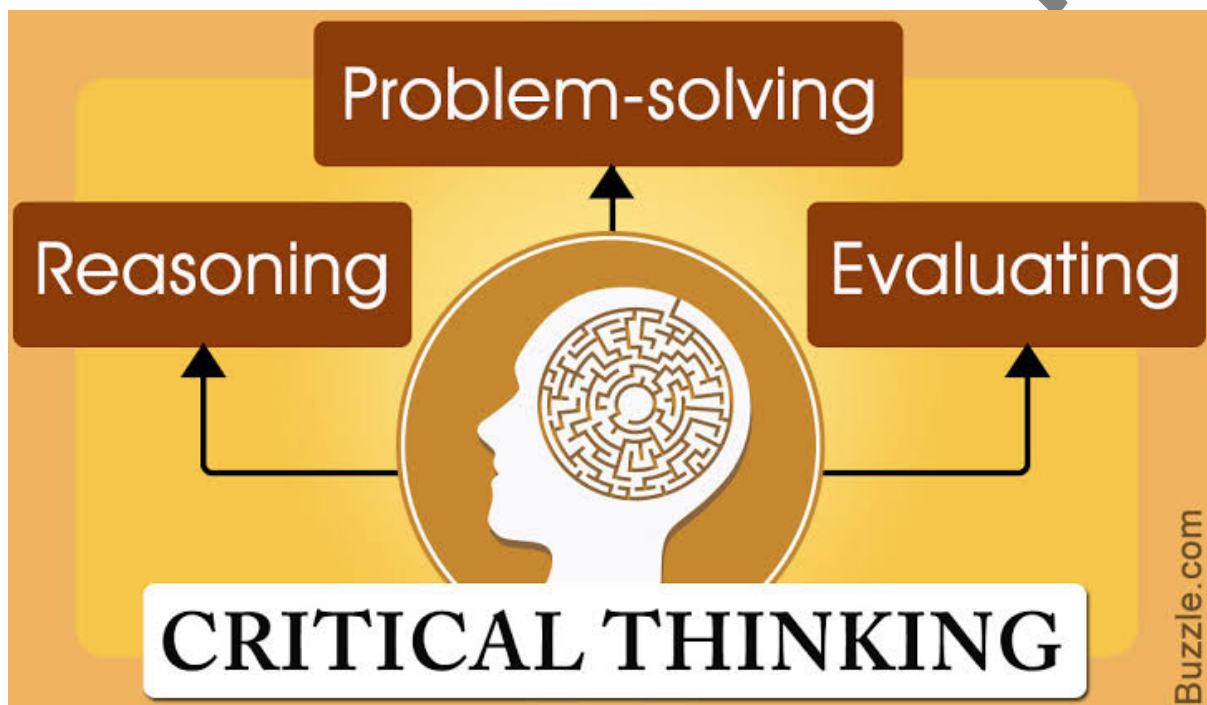
Prepare to address workplace problems

There is no such thing as a workplace that "works" 100% problem free. There will always be issues whether they are staff, admin, service or product related. How serious these problems are, or become, depends on *what* action is taken about them and *when* that action is taken.

Problems left unattended can fester and cause significant damage to an organisation and its relationship with its staff and customers, so they must be addressed effectively, and as soon as they have been noticed.

Identify and select workplace problem to be addressed

Most organisations will have procedures in place when dealing with workplace related issues. Depending on the nature of the problem, it might be an issue for senior management to address as it might impact on the entire company. It could, however, also be an issue contained within your own department or team.

Regardless of this, there are things to be considered when dealing with problems that you feel need to be resolved. You may, for example, need to consider if the issue affects others in the organisation, or just yourself. If it affects only you, you should be able to find a solution quickly and without impacting on the organisation too much, if at all.

It may also be a question of whether the problem is a systemic one or localized within a small area of the company. If it is a systemic problem, then it is a larger issue that needs to be investigated and resolved at management levels. If it is a localized problem, then it may, again, be within the scope of your role and your team to find a solution within your department.

When identifying problems that need to be addressed you should view them in terms of priority; which is the most important and will have the biggest negative impact on your team or organisation.

You might also look at them in terms of urgency. A big problem may not always be urgent, just as an urgent problem may not always be big.

Properly identifying the level of urgency and importance a task can be done by using the Eisenhower Matrix.

- Urgent tasks demand immediate attention and carry clear consequences for not satisfying or completing them on time.
- Important tasks contribute to longer-term objectives and goals that sometimes require planning in order to complete.
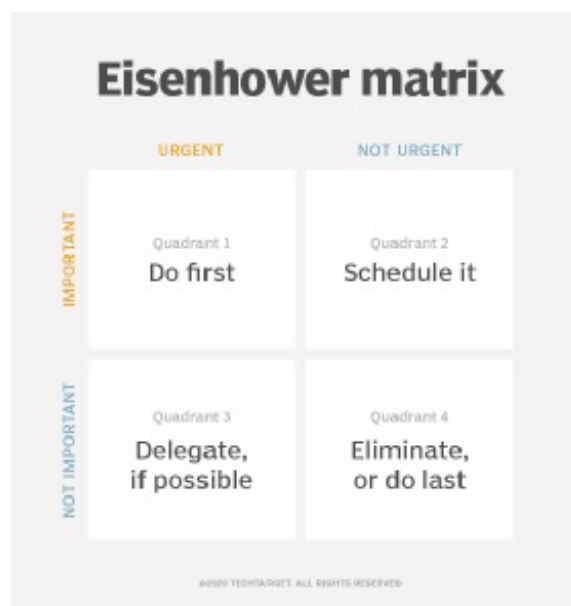
The matrix is divided into four quadrants. To use it you consider the urgency and importance of individual activities, and sort them into the appropriate quadrants. Each quadrant has a specific call to action; *do, schedule, delegate* or *eliminate*. Each quadrant has its own priority level: Quadrant 1 tasks should be done first, while Quadrant 4 tasks should be done last or eliminated.

- **Quadrant 1: "Do first."** These tasks are both urgent and important, demanding immediate attention and action. Quadrant 1 activities are the highest priority group with clear deadlines, and carry consequences for poor work quality or not meeting the deadline.
- **Quadrant 2: "Schedule it."** These tasks are important, but not urgent. They may or may not have defined deadlines, but are still critical for long-term goals. Proactive management of activities in this quadrant can help lighten the load of Q1 tasks. Q2 activities should have the second highest priority after Q1 activities
- **Quadrant 3: "Delegate, if possible."** These tasks are urgent, but not important. Though there is a level of time sensitivity, the tasks don't contribute significantly to long-term goals. This is where the ability to distinguish between urgency and importance comes into play. Typically perceived as "busy work," tasks that fall into this quadrant can be delegated without significant issue. Q3 activities have the third highest priority.
- **Quadrant 4: "Eliminate, or do last."** These tasks are neither urgent, nor important. Tasks in this quadrant are not necessary, and do not contribute to long-term goals or interests. It is recommended to either do these activities last or eliminate them altogether, and they constitute the lowest priority group.

As an example, an organisation's computer systems may be old and unable to handle new methods of online sales. This is, potentially, a big problem for the organisation as introducing a new system can be complex, costly and involve long timeframes. In the mean time it is missing out on online sales that would help pay for system improvements. Such a task could be placed in quadrant 2; while it is certainly important, it is not a matter of great urgency and is a project that needs to be properly planned. A smaller issue might occur when an expected stock delivery fails to show up. This might not be a huge problem but it is important to the store, and it is a of an urgent nature if the stock is needed for an advertised sale that is due to start within hours. So this problem could fall into quadrant 1; it is urgent, important and, in this case, can be accomplished relatively quickly.

Identify organisational and legislative frameworks

Before looking at how to address problems, however, you may have to consider if there are any organisational policies, procedures or any legal aspects that need to be taken into account when developing solutions.

For example; working in hospitality you will need to ensure that all hygiene regulations are observed if any changes are to be made in solving the problem. Equally you will need to keep liquor laws in mind when making alterations to workplace procedures in a bar.

If changes are made to staffing levels or conditions, you will need to bear EEO legislation in mind to ensure you are not discriminating against anyone (this also applies to diversity regulations), while workplace health and safety regulations must also be kept in mind at all times.

So in order to avoid further problems, or generate whole new ones, these, and other, industry related legislation and codes of practice as well as organisational standards should be considered when addressing issues and developing solutions. This, in turn means that you need to be able to *read and comprehend textual information and integrate ideas and concepts from various sources* in order to develop a well rounded and well thought through solution.

Develop questions to identify key issues and challenges

Making changes to address workplace problems can often be a complex matter, sometimes impacting on several layers of an organisation's operations. They can also be time consuming and expensive, so no changes should be made without, first, asking a range of important and relevant questions – and being sure you then have all the answers necessary to make informed decisions.

Questions that might need to be asked and *reflected upon* might include (but are not limited to):

- what is the exact nature of the problem?
- Why has it become a problem?
- What impact does this problem have on;
    - Staff
    - Customers
    - Products and services
    - Efficiency
    - General organisational wellbeing
- Can we fix the problem?
- How can we fix it?
- Where do we get help if we can't fix it internally?
- Do we need to get approval?
- Where to we get that approval?
- Are there any legal or ethical ramifications?
- What resources will we need?
- What are the cost factors;
    - Financial
    - Resources
    - Time frames to implement any changes
    - Customer impact
    - Staff impact
    - Organisation reputation and so on.

Consult key stakeholders using questions to gather information on selected problem

Finding answers to these and other questions may mean discussing the issue with other people; getting their perspective of the issue. The *advantages of different perspectives when asking questions* are that in gaining a variety of view points you can get a deeper understanding of the problem from different angles; seeing something that you, alone, did not.

People in other areas of the organisation will have differing ideas on why something is, or isn't, a problem as the issue may impact on them in specific ways unique to their job roles.

So in looking for a solution to a given problem, you should consult with others on your team. Depending on the nature of the issue you may even need to consult with external experts.

Key stakeholders might include (but are not limited to);

- colleagues from your own department or company, to get those differing perspectives
- supervisors or managers, who might need to be made aware of issues and who may need to give approvals for any solutions put forward. These stakeholders are also valuable resources in terms of their own unique perspective of issues; having a wider view point than staff working only in their own specific areas of expertise. They have a "big picture" overview and can provide insight into why something will or won't work.
- specialists in fields such as financial or legal issues
- government authorities who can provide information about legislation and compliance issues
- industry associations or governing bodies who can provide an in depth insight into your specific industry and offer advice on industry related issues, technology and many other things.

During the consultation process all of your key questions should be asked and answered accurately so that any solution you come up with is viable and based on known facts. You may also ask further questions of subject experts that had, perhaps, not occurred to any of the team previously. For example;

- What might be the *legal ramifications* of making specific changes to company policies?
    - What can be done to legally mitigate or eliminate the issues surrounding these ramifications?
    - What new policies or procedures would we be obliged to put in place to ensure legal compliance?

All of the information you gather can provide a solid foundation upon which to hold a stakeholder consultation and ensure that you have a sound understanding of the problem so that options and solutions can be assessed for effectiveness.

Task 1

1. Take a close look at, and outline, a specific issue that is causing problems for you, or that is of concern to you.

2. Describe the nature and ramifications of the problem and determine if there are any legal, ethical, organisational issues that you need to keep in mind when looking for solutions

3. Provide a list of stakeholders that you would invite to a consultation meeting and explain why it is important to gain different perspectives.

4. Develop a list of problem specific questions, relating to your area of concern, that you would ask during the stakeholder meeting

Map; PC 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4 plus PE points 2, 3, 4 KE points; 1, 2,

Evaluate solutions for workplace problems

As will almost always be the case when consulting with others on workplace issues, there will be differing ideas and opinions on how to solve a problem. Some people will agree with suggestions made while others will not. So it is essential, to a successful resolution of any issues, that the team stays focused on the problem at hand. To do this effectively, a thoughtful process of working through the key questions should be followed.

Identify a range of critical thinking techniques to generate solutions

You could, for example, begin the consultation process by discussing the development process for individual solutions generated with team members. This includes explaining and being able to apply critical thinking methods.

Critical thinking is the act of analysing facts to understand a problem or topic thoroughly. It generally involves a variety of steps; from identifying a problem or issue to developing a solution.

Common steps in critical thinking can include;

- identifying a problem or issue
- creating inferences on why the problem exists and how it can be solved
- collecting information or data on the issue through research or discussion with key stakeholders
- organising and sorting data and findings
- developing and executing solutions
- analysing what solutions worked or didn't work
- identifying ways to improve the solution

A deeper application of critical thinking might then involve;

- understanding the links between ideas.
- determining the importance and relevance of arguments and ideas.
- recognising, building and appraising arguments.
- identifying inconsistencies and errors in reasoning.
- approaching problems in a consistent and systematic way.
- reflecting on the justification of you own assumptions, beliefs and values.

Part of being a good critical thinker is being objective; analysing a problem without allowing emotions or assumptions to influence how you or the team think about it. Instead, you should only analyse the problem based on the context and facts you are able to collect.

Skills of a critical thinker

Critical thinking skills are essential in every industry at every career level, from entry-level staff to top executives and good critical thinkers will work both independently and with groups to solve problems.

The skills needed are varied and include observation, analysis, interpretation, reflection, evaluation, inference, explanation, problem solving, and decision making.

- **Observation** skills are the starting point for critical thinking. people who are observant can quickly sense and identify a new problem. Those skilled in observation are also capable of understanding why something might be a problem, and may even be able to predict when a problem might occur before it happens based on their experience.
- **Analysis.** Once a problem has been identified, analytical skills become essential. The ability to analyse the situation includes knowing what facts, data or information about the problem are important. You will also find analysis is an essential skill to eventually solve the problem.
- **Inference** is a skill that involves drawing conclusions about the information you collect and may require you to possess technical or industry-specific knowledge or experience. When you infer information about a situation, that means you are developing answers based on limited information. For example, a car mechanic may use inference skills to determine what is causing a car's engine to stall at seemingly random times.
- **Communication** skills are important when it comes time to explain and discuss issues and their possible solutions with colleagues and other stakeholders. Communication is an important skill to have and improve on for many purposes at work including critical thinking.
- **Problem solving.** After you've identified a problem, analysed it and discussed possible solutions, the final step is to execute the solution. Problem solving often requires critical thinking to implement the best solution and understand whether or not the solution is working as it relates to the goal

Develop solutions using knowledge and experience of team members

As mentioned earlier, people will have different ideas on how to solve a problem. To ensure the best possible outcome, in what could potentially become heated subjects, it is important to team morale and spirit to ensure that everyone involved in the consultation process, has the opportunity to have their ideas heard.

Not everyone in the consultation group will be working in the same department or area of the organisation as you. They may not even work for your organisation at all. They will, therefore, bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise to the team that will provide an in depth and well rounded understanding of the matter under discussion.

Developing, agreeing on, and applying criteria to assess potential solutions to issues.

Solutions should *solve* a problem and not cause a whole new one, or make the current situation worse than it already is. To ensure the teams efforts are effective and efficient you might need to develop a set of criteria or conditions that an acceptable solution must meet. For example, questions the team can ask in considering a specific solution might include:

- will this idea solve the problem?
- is the proposed solution realistic?
- is it fair and ethical?
- is it economical?
- will it provide more benefits than disadvantages?
- are the benefits significant?
- will it be harmful in any way?

- Is it in line with the organisation's mission statement and/or standards.

Having determined some criteria, the team can begin look at ideas to deal with the problem, keeping these criteria in mind. The focus at this point, however, is to generate ideas, and NOT evaluate. Tips that might help during brainstorming of ideas include:

- Ideas are to be expressed freely, without evaluation from others.
- All ideas, whether wild or otherwise, are accepted by the team.
- It is important to never reject or criticise ideas that are generated at this stage, for it will create negativity and slow the production of ideas.

Team members should try to think of as many ideas to solve the problem as possible; it is about quantity over quality at this stage. If criteria questions can be answered positively to a proposed idea, then this idea could be short listed for later evaluation and consideration. If the answers to any or all of those question are negative, then the idea can be discarded.

Professional Boundaries

In working together in a team, certain boundaries also need to be considered. When sharing ideas in the group, for example;

- ensure that diversity issues are observed and that no one is discriminated against
- no one is harassed or bullied
- any joking does not cross professional boundaries
- formalities are observed between staff at different levels.

A professional manner should be observed at all times to ensure no one is left out or made to fee uncomfortable.

Critically evaluate solutions generated and select solution to be implemented

Once satisfied that *all* questions have been answered and the criteria for choosing potential solutions have been met, the team can begin to evaluate and select the best options. Before evaluating those solutions, however, you first need to establish further criteria for judging those solutions. Questions you could ask, in determining the criteria, at this stage, might include;

- Does the solution achieve the stated goal?
- Does it have acceptable tradeoffs? Negative side affects of finding a solution must also be considered;
    - What are the downsides to this solution?
    - Can we live with them?
- Does the solution work within stated constraints?
    - Can it be achieved within a given time frame?
    - Does it meet specifications?
    - Is in within the cost budget?
    - Do we have the necessary resources on hand?

- Will the solution be acceptable by all users? Acceptance is a perceptual, emotional and psychological issue as well as an intellectual one. If a change being made is significant then those people who will be affected by it must be "on board" to ensure a successful transition between old and new ways of doing things.
- Is the solution economical?
  - Can we afford it?
  - Is it worth the effort and/or money?
- Is the solution practical?
  - Is it logical, useful, systematic, understandable and not overly difficult or complex.
  - It is a simple and direct way of achieving the desired outcome?
- Is the solution reliable. Will it continue to work over time with a high degree of reliability, consistency and effectiveness? Dependability is at the core of satisfaction.

Depending on the nature of the problem, and the industry you are in, there may be a range of other specific questions to determine the suitability and effectiveness of your proposal.

In addition to the criteria based method, above, there are other methods of determining the best solution including;

- Group consensus: all members come to an agreement.
- Majority vote: decision based on the majority.
- Averaging individual opinion: take opinion of all members and select the most averagely agreed upon solution.
- Expert decision: consult expert opinion on the matter.
- Decision by authority: group leader, committee or board of directors decides.

Task 2 – Roleplay

Hold a meeting with your consultation group, as listed in Task 1, and;

1. Re-define the problem together with the team
2. discuss the key questions you developed in task 1
3. brainstorm for solution ideas
4. using critical thinking techniques, develop a criteria for evaluating the solutions the group came up with
5. evaluate each idea against the criteria you developed.
6. choose the most effective option and explain why you chose it.

Map; PC 2.1, 2.2, 2.4, 2.5 plus PE points 3, 4, 5, 6, KE points 3, 4,

Finalise and review solution development

As we have learned, the solution to a problem can be complex, time consuming and costly. So it is essential to review whatever solution was decided upon before presenting it to all relevant stakeholders for their final approval and to discuss any last issues.

A Harvard Business professor once said "*don't bring me problems – bring me solutions*" and while this point of view is somewhat discounted today, due to the intricacy and complexity of living in the modern world, many managers do still hold to this way of thinking.

So when developing a solution to an organisational problem it is advisable to ensure you have taken every step to ensure your final solution has been well thought through and every aspect of it has been carefully researched, considered and mapped out.

Present solution to relevant stakeholders

At some point you might be asked to present the solution to a range of stakeholders different to those involved in developing the proposed solution. If this is the case, you should explain not only the solution you are putting forward but also the process you followed in arriving at it so that those, who will be making final decisions and giving approvals, have a proper understanding of the proposal and its background. Tell them;

- how you identified the issue in the first place and how it impacted on the organisation
- who was involved in the resolution process
- the criteria used to find and evaluate the solution
- critical thinking process that led to the final proposal.

Respond to challenges and questions from stakeholders

Depending on the complexity and cost of the solution being proposed, you may need to defend your ideas. You may come up against objections and questions that are not as accepting as you would wish. You can prepare for this by having an in depth understanding of the solution you are presenting and anticipating the challenges and questions you may be asked so that you can respond appropriately. Challenges you are likely to face, and should therefore be ready to answer might involve;

- exactly how the solution fixes the problem
- what compromises (if any) you had to make
- any negotiations you entered into and what (if any) concessions you had to make
- what costs are involved in terms of;
    - money to be spent
    - resources needed
    - time frames and so on.

In being fully prepared you can explain the features and benefits of your proposed idea and how it will fit into the organisations culture and standards.

The presentation itself might take a number of formats including;

- a personal, face to face, presentation during a meeting with stakeholders
- an online presentation using any of the available online meeting forums
- a paper based presentation; with a written report or proposal
- or a combination of any of these

Whatever method is chosen, make sure you have all the necessary reports, equipment and resources needed to present the information accurately and professionally. How well prepared you are can, potentially, contribute to the acceptance of your proposal.

Evaluate critical thinking processes with team members

Evaluating organisational processes and gaining feedback is one of the most important aspects of doing business, whether it relates to service or product issues, administration tasks, policies and procedures, production methods or any number of other business related operations. It is vital for the continued success of the organisation to ensure that they are using the best possible resources and processes available; be they tangible or intangible.

In the multimedia world of today, ways of doing business change quickly and the organisation must be prepared to adapt to those changes. With this in mind it is useful to get feedback from the consultation group on the way in which the current, or previous, issues were resolved with an eye to improving the necessary processes.

Despite all efforts that can be made to streamline business operations, there may still be a great many activities that involve more than one department or team. This means connections, communications and hand-offs between different sets of people. These handoffs create the risk of processing gaps, inefficiencies, and duplications, which can negatively affect performance or increase costs. Even well-designed processes and interactions are at risk of inefficiency creeping in. It is a fact of human nature; and so, it is something that needs to be managed.

Any workplace process can be improved upon. Depending on the size of the organisation and the complexity of a given process, a review might be a simple matter of discussing the latest project, and the manner in which it was handled, during a short meeting with relevant stakeholders. Larger, more complicated, processes however might need a more formal review and structure and might include the following steps.

- Mapping the process
- Analysing the process
- Redesigning the process
- Implementing and communicating the change
- Identifying critical thinking learnings to apply to individual and team situations

Documenting and mapping the process

One of the first steps in reviewing and documenting an organisational process is to map that process as it currently exists; For example, when working on a project you would need to;
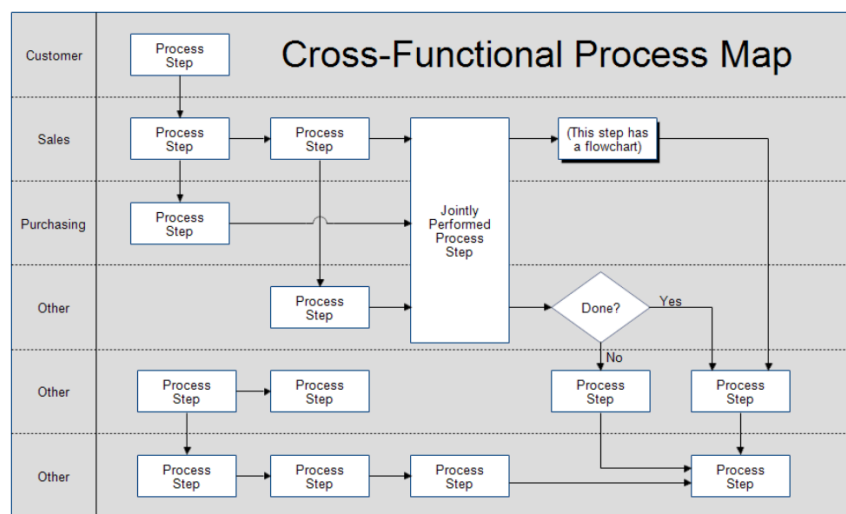
a. assemble a team to work on the project
b. define the objectives of the project; stating *exactly* what it is you want to achieve
c. define the scope of the project; what it should and shouldn't include, what constraints you will have to work within (budget, resources, time etc)
d. construct an initial plan or develop a range of ideas to be evaluated
e. and so on….

The mapping process may be fairly simple or could be a cross functional one that takes into account various departments within the organisation and how they interact with each other on separate or joint tasks.

Single purpose process map.
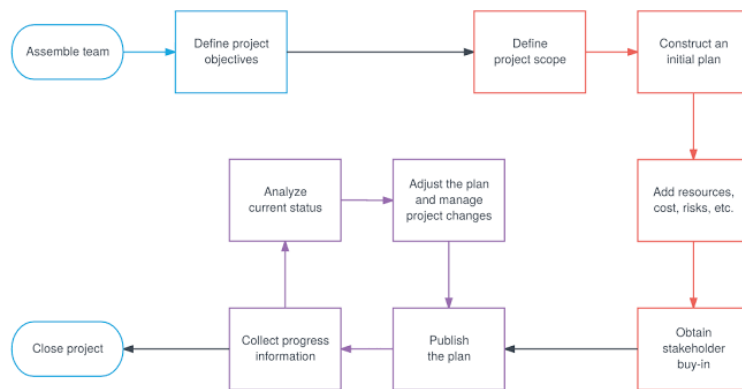
Cross functional process map

Analysing the process

With a process clearly mapped the team can move on to discussing the pros and cons of each step, asking;

Assemble a team to work on the project;

- How did we go about choosing team members?
- Did we choose the most effective people for the team?
- Did we allocate individual tasks of the project effectively and make best use of team member talents and experience?
- Were there any issues in working together?
    - What were they?
    - What can we do to avoid future personality issues within a team?
- Should a formal criterion be used to choose team members?
    - What would that criteria need to be?
- what department/s contributed the most / least to the project?

Define the project objectives;

- Did we receive accurate instructions and objectives from management?
- Did we define the objectives of the project accurately and in detail?
- What did we miss?
- Should there be formal criterion for defining objectives?
- Was the objective achieved at the end of the project?
    - If not; why not?
- … and so on….

Task 3

Using the "single purpose process map" on the previous page as a basis, continue writing questions for each section of the map that could be used in a process review.

Map: PC 3.3

Redesigning, implementing and communicating the new process

By using review questions such as these you can begin to build a picture of what the team did well, as well as what areas didn't quite work. As each deficiency in the current process becomes clear, team members take note and put forward ideas and suggestions for improvement.

These ideas and suggestions can then be evaluated by the review team – making sure that you are not replacing one procedure for another equally ineffective one – and a new process can then be designed with any new steps clearly outlined.

Upon approval from relevant managers this new process can then be *implemented and communicated* to all necessary staff members. Communicating this might take place;

- in a training session
- during a staff meeting
- by way of written instructions. Written procedures are also an excellent way of ensuring a consistent approach to completing work tasks. Consider the statement: *"in the absence of any clearly stated instructions, whatever the worker does is right".* The important point in that statement is; *in the absences of clearly stated instructions.* If staff are not told what is expected of them, then work processes and tasks could be completed incorrectly, leading to a decrease in productivity and job satisfaction.

Documenting the review process

It should be noted that there are a great many industries that are subject to both internal and external audits. These might be conducted by the company's accountants or compliance officers, or they might be conducted by government officials (depending on the exact nature of the business). Such audits are carried out to ensure the organisation's legal and ethical obligations are being met.

With this in mind it is important to document the entire review process so that you can show;

- that your organisation is continually improving
- the reasons why a procedure or policy was changed
- how you went about reviewing the change
- and outlining those changes, and how you implemented and communicated them.

Identify critical thinking learnings to apply to individual and team situations

The result of any feedback received, and the review process itself, can be used to improve the way in which the company or the team solves problems or changes its policies or procedures. But it can also lead to a way in which *individuals* think about workplace issues.

As we have previously discussed, but worth mentioning again, learning from critical thinking processes helps both individual staff members, as well as the organisation as a whole;

- understand the links between ideas.
- determine the importance and relevance of arguments and ideas.
- recognise, build and appraise arguments.
- identify inconsistencies and errors in reasoning.
- approach problems in a consistent and systematic way.
- reflect on the justification of you own assumptions, beliefs and values.

Critical thinking means being objective. It means analysing a problem without allowing emotions or assumptions to influence how you or the team think about it. By using critical thinking skills, you only analyse a problem based its context and on known facts. It is a skill that all people should try and develop.

Task 4 – Role play

In your teams, and using all of the information you have worked on so far;

1. present your solution to a new group of stakeholders (you can put together a group from your class for this)

2. each team member is to present an element of the proposal, answering any challenges and questions from the group you are presenting to.

3. After the presentation, in your team, hold a review meeting to discuss and evaluate the process you undertook to resolve the problem, the proposal you put forward and any issues arising from the presentation you just gave.

4. Produce a report on the evaluation results, outlining any changes you would make and explaining why you would make those changes.

5. Describe how the use of "critical thinking" helped you in tasks 1 through 4.

Map: PCs 3.1, 3.2, 3.3. 3.4 plus PE points7, 8