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Conceptual Thinking

A session from

Rx Online

Conceptual Thinking

The ability to analyze hypothetical situations or abstract concepts to compile insight.

Why is this skill important?

A person who has good Conceptual Thinking skills can mentally role-play the execution of a long-range plan and make accurate predictions concerning possible outcomes. In simpler terms, good Conceptual Thinking skills allow you to see the big picture, helping you determine what direction to take and what resources to use to attain the outcome that is desired.

Imagining and/or predicting changes in current reality seems to come naturally to some people. Many leaders who are good futuristic thinkers are curious, flexible and focused on the future, have a positive outlook, and are open to new ideas in a variety of areas.

People who have not developed their Conceptual Thinking skills often make very poor managers, because they don't see interrelationships between individual goals, short-term company goals, and long-term corporate missions. Not seeing these important relationships means that you won't be able to set priorities, direct your subordinates effectively or use appropriate resources to attain desired goals.

But why is all of this important? Think about it this way. You will never be able to achieve your long-term goals if you can't visualize them and act toward them in a reasonable, effective manner. Perhaps even more important, good Conceptual Thinking skills help you be taken seriously in managerial roles and help your company achieve its goals.

The best conceptual thinkers focus the majority of their effort on the most important 20 percent of all initiatives and goals. Your success in choosing the most important 20 percent lies in your ability to analyze the current situation, establish what you want to see as an outcome and gain support from critical resources to achieve those goals.

If you help your company achieve its goals, you are proving your own value again and again. With Conceptual Thinking, you'll be much more likely to be trusted with important projects and opportunities for advancement.

What skills are associated with Conceptual Thinking?

Someone who has mastered skills associated with Conceptual Thinking:

- Demonstrates ability to forecast long range outcomes and develop suitable business strategies
- Identifies, evaluates and communicates potential impacts of hypothetical situations
- Defines options to leverage opportunities in achieving business goals
- Develops plans and strategies that lead to desired strategic outcomes

How do you develop your own skills in Conceptual Thinking?

- Challenge the assumptions and beliefs inherent in your thought processes. Don't just keep doing something because it traditionally has been done that way. Rather, challenge the way it has always been done. Seek a better or more efficient way to do it. What else is possible?
- Brainstorm with your staff, co-workers or project team about how to improve critical factors that allow good performance or customer satisfaction. What are you doing now that holds you back?
- Write down any and all ideas you have for improvement even if they seem far-fetched or difficult to affect.
- Read industry publications and attend trade shows/conferences to stay abreast of current thinking in the field. Try to incorporate what you learn into your daily job.
- Always be on the lookout for new ideas and new approaches. Be educated about and open to trying novel technologies or processes.
- Keep your company's mission in mind when you make personal goals and assess progress.
- If you have employees, make sure that their performance goals are directly related to the company's and department's goals. If new company priorities are set, ensure that your employees understand how those priorities will affect their jobs. What new assignments will they have? What performance is expected? Why is their performance relevant?
- Review projects after they are complete to determine what contributed to success and what contributed to failures or problems. Keep developing your strengths and work to improve the areas that have caused failures or problems.
- Look at your own functional area from a strategic perspective. What are your group's particular strengths and weaknesses? What external organizations or factors affect the activity in your functional area?
- Perform a risk analysis. Think about what could go wrong in your functional area and develop plans for these "what if" scenarios.
- Once you get to know departmental priorities, compare them with one another. How do all of the departments' goals help reach the overall organizational mission?
- Think carefully about how other functional groups are affected by your success or shortcomings.
- Make an appointment to meet with your counterparts in other work groups or departments. Develop your relationships with those people and work to find common goals and ways in which you can help one another achieve them.
- Operate from a broad, long-term perspective. Don't just think about how your actions affect the short-term, but think big!
- When you find a strategic opportunity, plan in detail your approach to the opportunity including time, financial and human resources.
- Develop several solutions to each difficult problem or new opportunity you face, evaluate them objectively and then act on the best possible solution.

Conceptual Thinking

Activities

Activity 1: Key Stakeholders

Think of an important issue or topic that is currently under discussion at work. With this issue in mind, try to answer the following questions. Be sure to involve key stakeholders in the process.

Issue: _____

Who has a stake in the issue? _____

_____

What are the issues under the surface? _____

_____

What is each stakeholder's unique perspective? _____

_____

What are three potential solutions or action plans? _____

_____

What resources would be needed for the best solution or action plan to work? _____

_____

Activity 2: Organizational Priorities

If you haven't already, make an appointment to discuss organizational priorities with your supervisor or management team. Make a list of priority items and determine what your role is in achieving that goal. Also write down what other resources contribute to the success of the projects.

Organizational Priority #1: _____

What is your competition doing about meeting similar goals or priorities? _____

_____

_____

What's your role and/or action plan? _____

_____

_____

Who else and what else will contribute to the success of this activity? _____

_____

_____

Organizational Priority #2: _____

What is your competition doing about meeting similar goals or priorities? _____

_____

_____

What's your role and/or action plan? _____

_____

_____

Who else and what else will contribute to the success of this activity?

_____

_____

Organizational Priority #3: _____

What is your competition doing about meeting similar goals or priorities? _____

_____

_____

What's your role and/or action plan? _____

_____

_____

Who else and what else will contribute to the success of this activity?

_____

_____

Organizational Priority #4: _____

What is your competition doing about meeting similar goals or priorities? _____

_____

_____

What's your role and/or action plan? _____

_____

_____

Who else and what else will contribute to the success of this activity?

_____

_____

Activity 3: Strategic Opportunities

Identify key strategic opportunities that are possible for your organization. After you complete the following questionnaire, decide what strategies will be most effective and develop action plans for all stakeholders.

1. Who are our internal customers, or people within the organization that we must support or work with?
2. What do they need or request from us?
3. Who are our external customers, clients, suppliers and others outside our organization?
4. What do they need or request from us?
5. What external trends may shape our customers' needs and wants in the future? How can we learn more about those upcoming trends?
6. What products or services do we offer to meet those needs? What can we develop to accommodate them?
7. What are our competitors doing to meet those needs?
8. How can we find out more about what is going on in our industry or market?
9. What can we do to stand out positively from the competition?   What are our unique qualifications?
10. What can we do with and for our customers and suppliers that will have the best possibility of helping us meet our goals?