

### **Page 3: Developing A Critical Thinking Attitude**

When you hear a message that you don't agree with, how do you respond? How do you respond when you hear a message with which you do agree? Are your responses different? If you are like most people, then your reactions will be quite different.

Now ask yourself why you react differently? What is the result of your attitude?

Chances are that if you already have a propensity for agreeing with the message, you will let your guard down. You will tend to accept the message uncritically. On the other hand, if you have a propensity to disagreeing with a position at the outset, then you will mentally "shut down." You won't even hear the message, much less consider the possibility that it has merit.

Let's test this.

1. What do you do when the Jehovah's Witnesses come to your door? Have you ever listened to what they say? Could they be right? How do you know? How could you know?
2. What do you do when you hear an environmentalist speaking? What if the person is a Republican? What if they're a Democrat? What if the person is speaking against abortion? What if they are speaking in favor of legalized abortion?

Now consider your feelings as you read across the list of questions. Those feelings are interfering with your ability to reason fairly about these things.

### **Psychological Barriers to Logical Thinking**

1. Egocentrism, Ethnocentrism, and Sociocentrism

This can be grouped together as "mine is better thinking." My school is better, my car is better, my neighborhood is better, my way of thinking is better.

- a. Egocentrism is to focus on one's own self, needs, interests, and so forth. The egocentric person fails to consider others.
- b. Ethnocentrism and Sociocentrism is to focus on one's group. "My group is better than your group." "The group I belong to is right (because it's my group)."

One's race, religion, ethnic group, culture, family, political group, is considered superior to all others. This can be as benign as believing the '49ers are the greatest team simply because one lives in the Bay Area. It can be as deadly as believing one should drink poisoned Cool Aid because the leader of your group tells you to. "Mine is better" thinking of any kind can cut you off from other perspectives. It can cause you to make poor decisions about political candidates, and so on.

Example: "Justice Thomas isn't really black because he doesn't think like a black person." This kind of foolish thinking assumes that African Americans are a monolithic group which should think all the same way.

Example: "I know that mine is the one true church." Now it is possible that it is the one true church. But most people who say this "know" it not because they have carefully researched all the relevant information on all sides. Rather, people usually come to believe these things because of emotional reasons, family ties, or just familiarity. Now before you "nonbelievers"

start feeling smug, there is nothing different about you. Most people who reject religion are no more thoughtful about it than a religious person. People tend to arrive at their beliefs irrationally, no matter what the belief is.

Example: "I believe you Anita." This is a bumper sticker which showed up after the Thomas Hill confirmation hearings. Anita Hill stole the show with her allegation that she was sexually harassed by [then] Judge Thomas. People's acceptance or rejection of Ms. Hill's charges was generally not based on evidence, because the evidence was of the "he said - she said" type. There was no hard evidence. Instead, people who were conservative (as Justice Thomas is) tended not to believe Ms. Hill. People who were liberal tended to believe her.

Example: "I believe you Paula." Current bumper sticker regarding Paula Jones and her charges against President Clinton. Everything about the case is exactly the opposite as the one mentioned above.

## 2. Resistance to Change

### a. Insecurity and Fear

Even if the belief you have is false, the thought of changing that belief is often frightening. This is usually because of the implications and consequences. What about all the effort you put into defending the old position? What about all those years of living as though that position were true? How will my life be different if I accept this new position? Will my family or my friends reject me?

Many continue to believe something which is false because it is comfortable and familiar. This is irrational and unhealthy, but common.

### b. Fear and Tradition

Tradition is connected to loyalties. Loyalties are connected to relationships. For instance, if a person is raised in a religious home, many relationships are tied to that belief. It is traditional for family members to continue on. If information comes one's way which challenges that faith, there are psychological reasons that the person will not want to consider the challenges.

Always remember, truth cannot fall to criticism. Only those things which are not true can be revealed as false. One can challenge the truth all day long, and if it is true, then it will stand. If you are a member of a group which tries to shield itself from criticism, this should be a warning to you.

## 3. Conformity

Conformity is behaving the way others around us do. This is not always bad. For instance, we are grateful when everyone sits quietly in their seats during class. One should be pleased when everyone drives on the right side of the road.

On the other hand, you may recall a student in school that the children picked on. Remember the pressure to follow along? If you gave in, then you conformed in a way which was not good. Do you know people who started smoking because they wanted to conform to the group they hung around with.

### a. Pressures to Conform

Being social, we must relate to others. We want to be included. We want to be recognized. We want approval. Conformity assures to some degree that we will belong. That's why teenagers like wearing the same kinds of clothes and they like listening to the same kinds of music. If you're a teenager now, wait 20 years and you will realize that it certainly isn't because the clothes are attractive or that the music is good. Don't feel bad. Everybody wore goofy clothes and listened to bad music when they were teenagers. Most people grow out of it. Only those like Cher don't.

Taking a position that differs from the group is threatening. No one wants to be rejected. This was true when millions of Germans said nothing as Jews were transported to the concentration camps and many to their doom. It is true when injustice anywhere goes unchallenged. What are you going along with that is wrong? Conformity when inappropriate is cowardice. Taking a stand for what is true and right (not just different) is bold. It takes courage. Those are people who should be admired.

#### b. "Groupthink"

As Dr. Ruggiero says, the urge to conform can cripple thought. Groupthink is the phenomenon where a group of people will go along with a bad idea and agree that it is good. For instance, John F. Kennedy's plan to invade Cuba is widely recognized as a disastrous plan. Yet many skilled, intelligent, and experienced military men went along with this stupid plan. Many later admitted that they knew it was a flawed plan, but went along with it anyway.

This often happens in the corporate environment. A bad line of thinking gets out of hand for a time, and no one has the courage to say it is a bad idea which should be changed. Maybe it's a product line where much money has already been spent on research and development. Perhaps it's a marketing strategy that isn't working. Most of the people involved can see that things aren't going in the best way. Why don't they say something? First, they are isolated. If no one is saying anything, one may have the impression that they are the only one who thinks this way. Second, there may be perceived danger in taking a stand. They may not get a raise or promotion if the boss takes offense to the objection. Third, they may fear rejection by colleagues. So the cloak of silence becomes a breeding ground for collective bad thinking.

### 3. Face-Saving

Everyone wants to maintain a positive self-image. So when one finds themselves with "egg on their face" so to speak, there is a tendency to maneuver one's way out of the situation in such a way as to "save face."

Perhaps as a child you spilled milk and blamed it on your sister. That's face-saving. Perhaps you got a low grade on a test and said something about how the teacher just doesn't like you.

Often when people are taking opposing positions and one person's position is proven to be incorrect, rather than change his or her mind, they will maintain their position. They will illegitimately attack the opposition and irrationally continue to support their own. This is face-saving.

Do you find yourself stubbornly maintaining a position when conversing with others? Do you feel that you would "lose face" by admitting that you might be wrong?

Rationalizing is the opposite of reasoning. Where reasoning works from evidence to a conclusion, rationalizing works from the conclusion to evidence. Face-savers will selectively find evidence that supports their preconceived conclusion and ignore evidence that goes against that position.

While it is probably impossible to totally eliminate our face-saving tendencies, by being aware of it, we can overcome it.

Notes:

4. Ruggiero, Vincent, *Beyond Feelings* (Mountain View: Mayfield, 1995).