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Leadership Development

The 4 Types of Thinking Leaders Need to Practice—and Teach

by Heidi Grant and Shawn McCann

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Anna Tsukanova/Stocksy

Summary. What does it mean to add value? Adding value arises not just from solving a problem, but from solving the *right* problem, in ways that no one expected, to arrive at an even better outcome. These kinds of solutions don't come from our everyday... **more**

How do you *add value*? When we say a person, team, or company has added value, we usually mean that they've gone above and beyond what was asked or expected of them. For example, imagine your manager asks you to source three vendors who can deliver a needed service. You provide a list of three vendors, their

respective pros and cons, *and* a potential solution where you can solve for the needed service in-house instead. Or a prospective client comes to you looking for off-the-shelf feedback training, which your company can provide. After a few interviews with their leaders, however, you're able to deduce their problem—it's not that people aren't good at giving feedback, it's that they don't *want* to. You propose working with them to instead design a set of interventions aimed at incentivizing and normalizing feedback.

Both of these examples illustrate how adding value arises not just from solving a problem, but from solving the *right* problem, in ways that no one expected, to arrive at an even better outcome. And these kinds of solutions don't come from our everyday ways of thinking. They come from *expert thinking*, *critical thinking*, *strategic thinking*, and *systems thinking*—skills that consistently make it on those ubiquitous lists of things leaders at every level have to be really good at to meet the challenges of the future.

If you're a leader looking for your company to add value for clients and customers, or a manager looking for ways your team can add value, you need to be building these skills in your people. The problem for many leaders and managers, however, is that when we use terms like expert, critical, strategic, or systems thinking, too often we don't know when to apply or even how to define them.

If we had a nickel for every time we have heard someone say "Person X really needs to learn to think critically" when what they actually meant was that Person X seemed to not be thinking *at all*, we would be enjoying a cumbersome amount of nickels. Expert,

critical, strategic, and systems thinking aren't simply synonyms for *good* thinking. They each have unique features, are designed to deal with specific kinds of challenges, are appropriate only under certain conditions, and have very different end states in mind. Effectively teaching people to hone these skills must begin with a foundational understanding of how they differ.

It's just as important to recognize that thinking skills are unlikely to be honed organically, because most of these ways of thinking are *not natural*. We have to deliberately engage in them. In other words, they're not what our brains do on autopilot. (And let's not kid ourselves: Our brains are on autopilot, out of necessity, most of the time. That's not necessarily a bad thing.)

Here, we'll explore these four distinct types of thinking skills in depth, including what they mean and when they should be used, along with some tips for using AI tools as a thinking partner.

1. Expert Thinking

Expert thinking is rooted in deep knowledge in a particular field. This expertise is developed through years of experience, training, and consistent practice. We use expert thinking to do the work we do every day, often without even realizing it. Experts recognize patterns and engage in finely honed habits, relying on heuristics and assumptions that enable a speed and accuracy that novices lack. When using AI, it's the expert who immediately distinguishes fact from fiction where the novice may instead accept outputs at face value.

Novices tend to observe situations more superficially, not knowing what exactly they should be paying attention to. They expend a lot of effort doing things an expert could do in their sleep, and not nearly as well. They misapply rules where experts *create* them. Most companies are adept at turning novices into

experts, and "expert thinking" is what they bring every day to their clients and customers. Most often, when we say we want our people to think more critically, what we really want is for them to do more expert thinking. We also forget that being an expert in one field does not make us an expert in another, and this is where the limit of expert thinking begins.

When to use expert thinking:

- When a situation requires a quick, automatic response based on a well-defined set of rules.
- When prior experience and knowledge can offer a clear solution.

To illustrate how the different types of thinking differ from one another, we'll reimagine the *elevator paradox*.

Scenario: You are the owner of an office building, and you've received numerous complaints about the elevator. Tenants claim that the elevator is old, slow, and unreliable. They threaten to break their leases if you don't address the issue.

How an expert thinker approaches the elevator problem: Since you're not an elevator expert, you call an elevator technician to identify what's wrong and recommend repairs or a full replacement. This approach will almost certainly be costly and involve further inconvenience during the inspection and repairs, but it should address the tenants' concerns, at least to an extent.

We rely on expert thinking every day to solve problems, and most of the time, this type of thinking is all we need. Unfortunately, there are times when problems just won't seem to *stay solved*, or when solutions aren't obvious even to experts. This is precisely when we need to deliberately engage in critical thinking.

2. Critical Thinking

Critical thinking requires us to push pause on our otherwise automatic stream of expert reasoning. It involves stopping to first *surface*, and then *question*, the underlying assumptions upon which our expert conclusions rest. When we engage in critical thinking, we evaluate the quality of the information at our disposal: Is it current? Is it accurate? Is it comprehensive, or is there something we're missing? To do this, we actively seek out and consider multiple perspectives, ideally ones as different from our own as possible. Critical thinking is about asking *why*, and not simply accepting even long-held truths at face value.

One of the most well-known critical thinking techniques involves questioning whether or not you're even answering the right question in the first place. This technique, known as *reframing*, can be particularly useful for generating more innovative solutions to existing challenges. City planners looking to reduce traffic congestion might first think of adding more roads or lanes, but when asking a different question—*How can we reduce the number of cars on the road?*—suddenly solutions incentivizing public transportation and remote work become more salient. Through reframing, a whole host of solutions may present themselves that were overlooked before.

AI tools can help you surface assumptions, gain new perspectives, and even reframe the problem. Consider these example prompts:

- What assumptions do I hold about this problem?
- What is the problem from another person's point of view?
- What information do I need before acting on this solution?

There can be challenges when it comes to thinking critically. For example, with AI, the common advice is for users to apply critical

thinking to AI outputs. But it's difficult to think critically in a field you're not expert in. It is possible to apply critical thinking principles and question the validity of AI outputs, but knowing what questions to ask and which answers are appropriate still requires an expert to weigh in.

Unfortunately, these pauses to collect, question, and validate information slow down the work and can negate the timesaving benefits AI is supposed to create. For leadership, pausing to challenge current ways of knowing and doing or to reframe the problem can also feel subversive, or at least appear to interrupt the forward momentum of a project. Despite those drawbacks, we still advocate for critical thinking, as it can save time by shifting our attention to the right problem, even if it doesn't always feel that way while engaged in the process.

When to use critical thinking:

- When experts disagree on a solution.
- When traditional approaches fail to solve a problem.
- When the symptoms of a problem keep recurring.

How a critical thinker approaches the elevator problem: It's tempting to assume that the problem is that the elevator is too slow—after all, that's what your tenants are telling you. Thinking critically might lead you to question that assumption. *Why* are the tenants saying the elevator is too slow? Is it because too many people are trying to use the elevator at the same time? If so, coordinating the timing of its use among the tenants may be needed. Or is it perhaps because waiting for the elevator is annoying? In that case, having something distracting in the lobby, like mirrors, music, or a TV might make the wait time fly by. Reframing the problem in these ways suggests other, more-

effective and less-costly possibilities you might not have considered.

Both critical and expert thinking often begin with a specific, concrete problem that needs solving, but neither are particularly good at helping you think about the future and go beyond what *is* to what is *possible*. For that, you need strategic thinking.

3. Strategic Thinking

Strategic thinking is about taking a long-term, high-level perspective. It involves looking beyond the immediate situation and transcending the limits of our current ways of knowing and doing. People often confuse strategic thinking with thinking that is analytical, rigorous, or execution-focused. If anything, strategic thinking's defining characteristic is the use of *imagination*—a willingness to ask "What could be?" or "What if?"

To help you ask these questions, in the absence of a thought partner, AI tools can support your exploration. Try experimenting with different prompts to gain insight into what's possible. Here are a few example prompts:

- Run a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threat (SWOT) analysis for making a significant investment in my building to improve elevator service.
- What are the current trends in new buildings with respect to vertical conveyance of people and inventory?
- Provide a data visualization of the projection for the growing need of modern infrastructure in downtown NYC, specifically elevators.

When to use strategic thinking:

- When making big decisions with long-term consequences that will shape or constrain your future.
- When thinking about your team or company's future.
- When trying to anticipate how market forces and customer needs might change.

How a strategic thinker approaches the elevator problem: Sure, you could make the elevator run a bit better and perhaps make the wait less annoying. But ultimately, you might suspect that these fixes aren't really good enough, and you're ready to imagine something *better*: something that will make your building even more appealing to a new type of tenant, allowing you to charge more for the space. You can consult with architecture firms to study the building blueprints or hire engineers to discuss zoning and ideate together on what is *possible*.

Strategic thinking offers the opportunity for organizational innovation. Using strategic imagination and asking "what if?" allows organizations to move past the status quo and shape their environment instead of reacting and adapting. Using our elevator example, shifting from traditional office spaces to court a new untapped type of tenant can be risky as you gamble your current stream of steady income. One way to experiment with possible outcomes prior to taking the leap is to use our fourth type of essential thinking: systems thinking.

4. Systems Thinking

Systems thinking is the ability to see the interconnectedness of things. It involves understanding how different parts of a system interact with each other and how changes in one part of the system can affect other parts. Systems thinking requires knowledge of interdependencies and the ability to see all the

elements of a system simultaneously and holistically—no small task for the human brain. This is why systems thinking relies so heavily on the use of effective methods of visualization—like using two-dimensional whiteboards or three-dimensional LEGO bricks—to help our brains hold many potentially complex parts of a single system in mind, within the constraints of working memory.

One way AI tools can help is by filling in any gaps and identifying internal and external influences on a system that may not be readily apparent. Example prompts include:

- How do the tenants and elevators (parts of the system) interact with each other?
- What other internal or external influences are missing from my model of the system?
- What patterns are emerging from this system?

When to use systems thinking:

- When you need to understand a complex situation with interconnected elements.
- When you want to identify patterns and relationships within a system.
- When you want to design for or take into account *emergence*—i.e., qualities possessed by a system that are not possessed by any one part of the system but are created by the collective operation of its parts. Pricing bubbles and traffic jams are emergent properties of financial markets and automotive transportation, respectively, but not of individual traders or drivers.

How a systems thinker approaches the elevator problem: Before you spend the money on costly repairs, you could think about the entire ecosystem that is your building. What types of tenants are there, on which floors are they located, and how are they using the elevator? Knowing this might help you understand whether a second elevator bank is best used for passengers or freight. Elevators are of course not the only way to go up: What about the stairs? Are your tenants also using them, and if not, why?

Additionally, systems thinking requires you to elevate your thinking and consider *all* the influences on your building's occupancy. How might new congestion pricing on drivers impact your building's downtown location? What about the new multistory parking garage being built nearby? Is the availability of commercial space in your part of town likely to increase or become even more scarce?

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These invaluable types of thinking are essential tools of modern leadership, and each is absolutely something that can and should be taught in every organization. Understanding what each type of thinking is for, and when to use it, provides leaders with a common language and a way to choose the right tool for the right job at the right time. Although you can only use one tool at a time, it does not prohibit you from thinking through a problem, plan, challenge, or opportunity with every type. Conducting cycles of having an expert provide their perspective, then challenging assumptions through critical thinking, putting the validated information in the context of systems thinking, and then engaging your strategic imagination by asking "what if?" of the system, will provide you with the most complete picture.

It should be noted that *every* type of thinking is best done in teams, not as individuals. There is no thinking that isn't made more thorough, more accurate, and more innovative by the presence of other minds, offering different perspectives and together, asking even better questions.

Heidi Grant is a social psychologist who researches, writes, and speaks about the science of motivation. Her books include *Reinforcements: How to Get People to Help You, Nine Things Successful People Do Differently,* and *No One Understands You and What to Do About It.* She is the Director of Behavioral Science & Insights, EY Americas.

Shawn McCann is a senior researcher on the EY U.S. Behavioral Science and Insights team and Professor of Professional Military Education at the University of Cumbria, UK.

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