

Planning for Tomorrow with Today's Toolkit

At age 13, my dad looked back on the Iranian Revolution and moved to England completely alone to live with his grandmother. He left behind everything he once knew – from the smell of his mother's ghormeh sabzi on a winter's evening to the feeling of the cold water brushing his ankles on a hot day by the Caspian Sea. In search for a new place to call 'home,' he left behind a country he loved and faced a future of uncertainty.

At age 23, my mom left the US, the only country she had ever lived in, to spend the next years in a hopscotch around Eastern Europe. She traded a quiet Washington farm town for the noise of office building chatter – in Latvian, Lithuanian, German – all forming a backdrop for her fresh start. She spent her 20s on the move - never quite knowing where she would end up next – but knowing it would be something unfamiliar.

Mom and Dad were faced with a million questions: how long would they stay? Who would they meet? Most importantly, what decisions would they have to make? Since, they have created a life and a family in England, working jobs that often require even more demanding decisions.

I like to think my parents' journeys have inspired within me a sense of adventure; completely alone, I moved to the US at age 18 and Australia at age 19. Although I never faced a language barrier, the uncertainty of how to create a home on the other side of the world remained the same.

As I look ahead at my last year of university, I feel uncertain about what lies beyond. Whichever part of the globe my pin lands on, I know I will be faced by a range of decisions, and in a post pandemic world, the rest of my generation likely will, too. We are growing day by day into our world's leaders, and what lies ahead is a fog of uncertainty and unique challenges.

In *Management: Tasks, Practices, Responsibilities*, Peter Drucker states “the question that faces the strategic decision maker is not what his organizations should do tomorrow. It is ‘what do we have to do today in order to be ready for an uncertain tomorrow?’”¹ Although my mom and dad never quite knew what lay ahead, they knew each decision they made in the present was crucial in crafting their uncertain path. While their choices may seem spontaneous, they have always been planners; honouring the fact that each decision today may be vital when they face their next journey.

In order to lead a world into this uncertainty, I believe it is the responsibility of our generation's leaders to build a toolkit today to tackle the unknown ahead. No tool in the box is more essential than a leader's ability to think critically, especially when the decisions amidst the fog are of the highest pressure and urgency.

¹ Drucker, Peter F. *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974. Print.

Critical thinking can have many interpretations, but is defined by the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking as “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analysing, synthesizing, and and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.”²

In my eyes, critical thinking is using the world around us to make objective, unbiased, and informed decisions.

It provides us the answers to questions which may not have even been asked yet.

It allows us to take on uncertainty with clarity and composure, so we can find a solution to whatever we are presented with.

It protects us from the uncertain tomorrow by polishing each tool in the toolkit.

Whatever decision they were faced with, my mom and dad displayed admirable critical thinking. Never allowing biases or spontaneity to cloud their judgement, they both made choices with composure and control. They asked questions of those around them and educated themselves on situations of the present and future in order to always be prepared for what was to come. I like to think I inherited that ability for critical thinking; like them, I am a planner, building my skill set today to prepare me for an uncertain tomorrow.

In a time where our futures are as uncertain as ever, I believe my generation of emerging leaders is prepared for the critical thinking demands. More than any before us, our generation is exposed to increased globalization, a platform of social media, and increased resources for research.

Globalization of Thought

Engulfed in a sense of awe for the resilience and bravery of my parents, I wonder how they have made such high-pressure decisions throughout their lives. However, I can't help but attribute their diverse thinking styles to their exposure to cultural differences. In order to make a truly objective decision, it is crucial that we know the alternatives that lie before us. I believe that there is no better way to do this than interaction with people from other cultures.

As we face a world of rapid globalization, our generation of leaders is more prepared than any other to refine critical thinking tools. Particularly in the West, international students fill the student body of our institutions, meaning that even students who grew up in a homogenous upbringing spend many formative years exposed to a range of cultures. While my parents' high school composites show hundreds of almost identical students, mine is quite literally a melting point of different cultures- no two students look the same.

² "Defining Critical Thinking." *The Foundation for Critical Thinking*. N.p., n.d. Web. 31 May 2020.

I don't believe critical thinking does not exist in such homogenous cultures; a human's ability to make objective decisions, at the end of the day, is down to their own capabilities for such analysis. However, leaders who expose themselves to globalized thought are much likely to come up with a more diverse range of solutions when making decisions.

In *The Effective Decision*, Peter Drucker writes, "by far the most common mistake of the decision maker is to treat a generic situation as if it were a series of unique events...the inevitable result is frustration and futility."³ Well, the more we know about experiences from leaders around the world, the less likely we are to label an event as truly unique. By understanding the true nature of our situation and its alternatives, we can increase our capabilities for critical thinking.

With exposure to a range of dissenting experiences and opinions, especially when making politicized decisions, our tools of critical thinking are polished. Knowing and understanding the opinions of other cultures allows us to put ourselves in their shoes. As a result, we can ensure not only that our opinions on such issues are unbiased, but our decisions are truly objective.

The Rise of Social Media

All too many times, I have heard the arguments that social media robs our generation of the ability to formulate their own opinions. A 14-year-old girl watches her older sister's Instagram post urging her followers to vote for a particular candidate in the upcoming election. This malleable teen automatically shifts her opinion to match her sisters, and without thinking for herself, creates a similar post, instigating a chain reaction upon her friends. Social media makes it easy to adapt our opinions to match those around us. Some may argue this dissolves the tendency for critical thinking.

I think the opposite. My daily Facebook feed consists of hundreds of dissenting opinions. I can't help but laugh as I scroll; each post conflicts with the previous one, making it impossible for me to simply latch on to one viewpoint. Yes, many people have likeminded Facebook friends, resulting in a feed with echoes of the same opinion. However, on platforms like Instagram and Twitter, on which we are exposed to a variety of friends, family members, and influencers, we witness a much wider base of opinions.

For example, during the current Covid-19 pandemic, Instagram feeds are covered in both 'stay at home' campaigns and protesters to reopen the economy. As I scroll through each day, I witness posts from both healthcare professionals threatened by the virus and advocates for an imminent return to life as they knew it. As a result, I am forced to pick out the critical thinking tool, forming my own objective opinion on each issue that arrives on my feed. Many others of my generation do the same every day, using social media as a way to gather the conflicting information before using critical thinking for an objective decision.

³ Drucker, Peter F. "The Effective Decision." *Harvard Business Review*. N.p., 17 Oct. 2016. Web. 31 May 2020.

As Peter Drucker states in *The Effective Decision*, effective executives are not “overly impressed by speed in decision making...they want to know what the decision is all about and what the underlying realities are which it has to satisfy.”³ That is, a powerful leader employing critical thinking will not allow themselves to make a quick, effortless decision based on a social media post. Instead, they will use the platform to their advantage; seeking out a range of opinions before objectively forming their own.

The Internet and the Confirmation Bias

For my generation of emerging leaders, particularly in the West, life without the internet is difficult to imagine. Like many, I am younger than Google, and am guilty of relying on the search engine for almost everything. My peers and I have always had the ability to research any topic of discussion at the push of a button, allowing us to expand our critical thinking as we enter a generation of leadership.

Easy access to the internet allows us to avoid confirmation bias, defined by the Encyclopaedia Britannica as “the tendency to process information by looking for, or interpreting, information that is consistent with one’s existing beliefs.”¹⁴ When scrolling through internet sources, we are pulled towards journals, articles, and speakers confirming our prior opinions, and resist those against them.

Peter Drucker states in *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*, “we perceive, as a rule, what we expect to perceive. We see largely what we expect to see, and largely what we expect to hear.”²

Drucker is highlighting the key danger of the confirmation bias, which threatens the objectivity of critical thinking. All leaders look to those before them who emulate success, often believing these leaders acted flawlessly instead of acknowledging their biases. Many, therefore, avoid critical thinking when deciding to follow in their footsteps. Instead, they seek out information that supports how they can follow those before them and ignore that which dismisses it.

As Drucker writes in *Turbulent Times*, “In turbulent times, managers cannot assume that tomorrow will be an extension of today.”⁵ Instead of letting the confirmation bias lead them into the fog of those before them, our future leaders must recognize their biases and seek out the

⁴ Casad, Bettina J. "Confirmation Bias." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 09 Oct. 2019.

² Drucker, Peter F. *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974. Print.

⁵ Drucker, Peter F. *Turbulent Times*. New York: Harper & Row, 1980. Print.

information that disproves the leaders of the past. This is how they can exercise true critical thinking and protect themselves during future uncertainty.

With search engines like Google in our back pockets, this generation is able to not only quickly access information that confirms our opinions, but can view opposing information, too. As a result, our emerging generation is becoming increasingly aware of our tendency to drift towards these biases and is therefore encouraged to gather information with little to no influence.

The ability to employ critical thinking for important leadership decisions, while possible before the internet, is much easier with it. This efficiency allows us to access opinions of and decisions made by those before us, whether positive or negative. With this evidence, we can thoroughly analyze choices of leaders in the past- both those that worked well and those that did not- to arrive at our own conclusions. With the internet in our toolbox, our ability to think critically will make us a promising generation of leaders.

Conclusion

Both of my parents looked out upon futures of uncertainty, just like many emerging leaders of my generation. Like my parents did not know what lay before them, my generation faces a similar fog ahead. However, I believe that with the help of an increasingly global world, the rise of social media, and access to the depths of the internet, my generation is prepared for the critical thinking demands that lie before us.

A few months ago, I sat around a fire with a group of friends from high school when one of them asked me if I feared what lies ahead after university. While I do fear the uncertainty my generation has been presented with, I also feel a sense of pride for my classmates and peers who look out upon the same fog. Peter Drucker believes “the greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday’s logic.”⁵ As my generation adapts to our everchanging world with decisions fueled by critical thinking, I believe we have the ability to think not one- but many steps ahead. I think Drucker would feel the same. I think he’d wonder if we can not only ignore yesterday’s logic, but instead, can use our critical thinking to discover tomorrow’s logic.

While it’s easy to fear the uncertainty, I put my trust in my generation’s ability to use tomorrow’s logic, as long as we keep critical thinking in our toolkits.

⁵ Drucker, Peter F. *Turbulent Times*. New York: Harper & Row, 1980. Print