

Developing Critical Thinking Skills in Your Sales Force

BY BEN BALL AND SUSANNE CONRAD



The Importance of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is an important skill for sales teams. The true need is for sales teams to go beyond understanding critical thinking concepts. Even more important is the ability to:

- Make the connection between the concepts
- Apply critical thinking concepts in a concrete way
- Make critical thinking a standard approach to the daily work of the sales team

To accomplish this, sales teams must understand the critical thinking path and be able to apply it to business situations they encounter in their everyday work. The results of developing strong critical thinking skills in the sales force are well worth the investment.

First, your sales team will be able to build more credibility with customer by demonstrating

- Consistent and thorough preparation and planning customers come to rely on
- Objective, well-thought out recommendations customers come to value
- Expertise customers compare favorably vs. competition

Also, your sales team will be able to build stronger relationships with customers based on:

- The credibility your sales force brings to the information and data presented to customers
- Demonstrated professionalism
- Greater trust that your sales force can add value to the customer's business

In addition, your organization will notice fewer errors and missed opportunities due to an objective, standardized approach to the daily work of the sales team. The ultimate prize is a positive impact on sales.

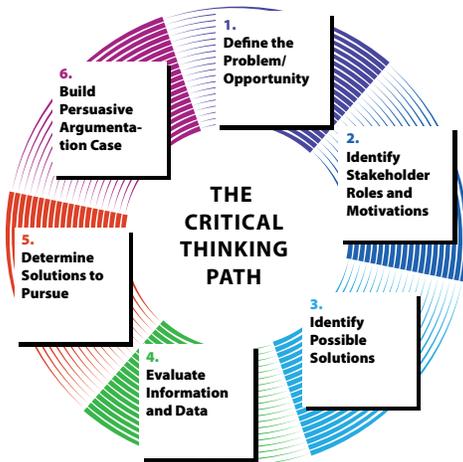
The Critical Thinking Path

The critical thinking path consists of six steps:

1. Define the problem or opportunity
2. Identify the stakeholder roles and motivations
3. Identify the possible solutions to the problem or opportunity
4. Evaluate the information and data available to you
5. Determine the solution you will pursue
6. Build a persuasive argumentation case to present

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The more often one uses the critical thinking path, the more intuitive it becomes, the quicker one can complete the steps and the more successful one is in generating results.

Can You Really Teach Someone Critical Thinking?

Absolutely! But you have to go about it the right way.

Organizations typically offer critical thinking courses that do a good job of introducing the concepts and theories of critical thinking that's necessary and forms a solid foundation. Add to that many critical thinking courses, by their very nature, are far too generalized or basic to be rated as "exceptionally useful to me on the job" by many sales people. In addition to teaching critical thinking concepts, true sales results usually do not follow until you help your sales force figure out how to apply those concepts and theories to situations they face daily in the field – and in such a way as to make them easy to apply.

Dechert-Hampe has developed a program that makes the most effective and efficient use of your sales team's time and your organization's resources. The concept is simple:

- Convey concepts and theories in a self-study format
- Demonstrate application via examples from your own organization in a face-to-face environment (presented by the actual people who accomplished the work, if possible)
- Spend the majority of training time coaching the sales team as they apply the concepts in live work activity – preferably a learning event that ensures group sharing and participation
- And, of course, follow up afterward to ensure the learning sticks

A Real-World Example

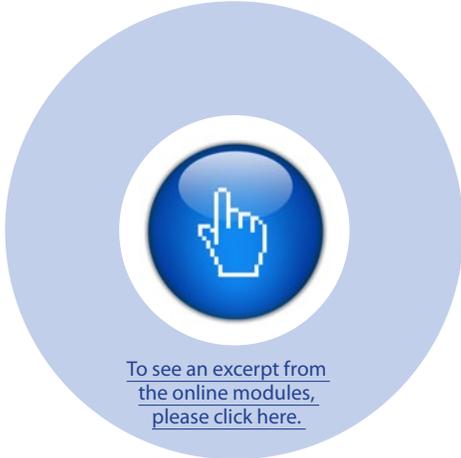
Let's examine how Dechert-Hampe's approach worked for a mid-size consumer goods company that assessed its sales team and realized that it fell short of the mark relative to management expectations in critical thinking.

• Self-Study Rollout of Critical Thinking Concepts and Theories

The first step in the learning process directed sales team members to complete four half hour modules on Critical Thinking Concepts housed on to the Sales intranet. Team members could access the program at any convenient time but were required to complete the modules prior to attending their scheduled Critical Thinking Workshop. The organization announced and stood firm on barring those who had not completed the pre-work from attending the workshop – the completion rate was 100%.

The online modules proved to be highly useful to team members because they were customized to include terminology as well as industry-, organization- and customer-specific examples rather than generic content.

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• **Critical Thinking Workshop**

Next, Dechert-Hampe facilitated a workshop designed specifically to put the concepts and theories into context and into practice.

After a very brief review of critical thinking concepts, several sales team members were invited to share recent Critical Thinking Path application to a business problem they faced. Rather than force the example to demonstrate the entire Critical Thinking Path, DHC worked with the presenters to identify when they had intuitively used or deviated from the Path and how results were enhanced or reduced as a result. Preparing these presentations required very little time and effort on the presenter's part as Dechert-Hampe provided them with a template for noting their thought process – gaps in Critical Thinking Path application were considered acceptable to paint a "before" picture.

Next, Dechert-Hampe facilitated a structured series of activities in which the sales team applied an actual individual sales assignment provided by their manager – not practice activities, but a real application that the sales team members would be required to execute when they returned to their job. The emphasis was on using the Critical Thinking Path to plan the sale and to work with the Dechert-Hampe coaches to refine and complete the plan.

The results was clear: not only did the sales team understand the concepts and theories surrounding Critical Thinking, but they were able to see the immediate usefulness and application in their day to day work, to try their hand at their new skill in a safe environment and leave the workshop with a live work plan to execute and use as their "template" going forward.

• **Learning Follow Through**

Sales team members' managers were given clear instructions and guidance in following up and reporting the results post-workshop. The new product line sell-in immediately following the training was one of the most successful in recent company history. Sales management attributed much of the success to a superior job of anticipating and meeting customer needs by the Sales team.

So, the Bottom Line Is ...

Although critical thinking may be an ambiguous skill to teach, the results of developing that skill in the sales force are essential to meeting sales goals. The key is to drive the learning through hands on application and example based on real world application customized to your organization.