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Critical Thinking competency for an Open Government

Author: Veronica Creţu and Nicolae Creţu

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Abstract/ Executive Summary:

Critical thinking is one of the key competences of the today's leaders, managers, public servants, policy makers, others.

During the past 20-30 years, hundreds of studies and projects have been conducted in order to reform the educational processes and to integrate the development of critical thinking in the educational system. The reason it is so important is because critical thinking competency is directly connected with independent decision making process, which allows for evidence based, out-of-box solutions and approaches. People who are able to think critically, are able to generate un-standard solutions, be free of stereotypes, embed innovation as part of the work they do. The complex world we are living in, the rapidly changing environment, the unprecedented flow of information and data – all require new sets of competencies in the government, and critical thinking is on the top of the list. Today, public servants have to be more thorough, more adaptive, more flexible, be able to assess multiple scenarios for the same problems/issues and be able to generate solutions which might have not been implemented before. Thus, critical thinking is essential given that it helps "overcome and become aware of biases, false assumptions, myths, and faulty paradigms that can hamper effective decision making" (Bazerman 2005).

This document looks into six specific cognitive processes (departing from Bloom's Taxonomy) that altogether form the critical thinking competency, and provide clear descriptions of the type of attitude, skills and knowledge needed in order to develop each one of them. The paper addresses public servants as "learners" of critical thinking and provides practical guidance accordingly.

1. The need for critical thinking competency in the public sector

Historically, public administration has been primarily concerned with issues and challenges related to faithful application of the law, along with integrity, honesty and efficiency being at the foundation of this process. Throughout the past years, however, the roles of the public administration have started to suffer slight changes, due to the fact that public administration has become one which should engage actively not only in applying the rule of law, but also in creating and interpreting it. How can such creation and interpretation process be done 'correctly', 'wisely' and in the 'public interest' remains a huge question for many public administrations from around the world?

As societies increase in size and complexity, and citizens have more and more access to information including via online medium, governments increase too, and take on more functions, more responsibilities. Public institutions tend to become more specialized around specific issues. With public administration becoming more specialized and more complex, people who are to perform administrative tasks will have more attention on them, particularly on their level of competency and the degree to which they are ready to cope with increasingly challenging and sophisticated tasks, especially for those which they might not have received training for. Thus, the quality of the in-service or pre-service training is critical for the overall success of the public administration. Systematic and continuous efforts to study ways to improve public administration and make it more efficient is even more relevant today, when several Governments are endorsing ambitious, open government, open data, open education, open health, or other related agendas. These modern developments are requesting new types of competences from public servants, particularly given that the public policies processes change significantly as well. This is extremely important given that policy-making is the process by which governments translate their political vision into programs and actions to deliver 'outcomes' – or the so-called desired change to be produced in the real world. Policy-making is a fundamental function of any government (be it democratic, in transition, other). Its' quality depends directly on the quality and competency level of the human resources involved.

Why is that so? The world for which these public policies are being developed is becoming increasingly complex too, challenging, uncertain and hard to predict. Citizens are better informed, have rising expectations and are making growing demands for the better quality of the public services as well as for services tailored to their individual needs.

How then public servants have to deal with these complex changes and challenges? What are the best ways to address them? What are the guiding principles they should follow?

If we look for example, at the ***"Public service principles that should guide EU civil servants"*** [1] it can be seen how complex and demanding those principles are:

- **Commitment to the European Union and its citizens** - Civil servants should be conscious that the Union's institutions exist in order *to serve the interests of the Union and of its citizens* in fulfilling the objectives of the Treaties. They should ***make recommendations*** and decisions only to serve these interests.
- **Integrity** - Civil servants should be guided by a sense of propriety and conduct themselves at all times in a manner that would ***bear the closest public scrutiny***. This obligation is not fully discharged merely by acting within the law.
- **Objectivity -** Civil servants should be impartial, ***open-minded, guided by evidence, and willing to hear different viewpoints.*** They should be ***ready to acknowledge and correct mistakes.***
- **Respect for others** - Civil servants should act respectfully to each other and to citizens. They should be polite, helpful, timely, and co-operative. They should make genuine efforts ***to understand what others are saying and express themselves clearly, using plain language***.
- **Transparency -** Civil servants should be willing ***to explain their activities and to give reasons for their actions***. They should keep proper records and ***welcome public scrutiny*** of their conduct, including their compliance with these public service principles.

As it can be seen from just this example above, public servants are regularly faced with the demand to justify actions, provide arguments, formulate questions, make informed and evidenced based decisions and so many more. To be able to successfully fulfill these tasks, public servants need to be able to think critically, need to master the **critical thinking competency!**

What **is a competency** in the first place**:** *A competency is the capability of an individual to apply a set of related knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to successfully perform certain tasks in a defined work setting.*

What is **critical thinking competency and why is it so important?** ***Critical thinking competency***

[1] https://www.enisa.europa.eu/about-enisa/procedures-and-policies/public-service-principles-for-the-eu-civil-

is directly connected with independent decision making process. Thus, the complexity (profoundness) of the applied critical thinking depends on the complexity of the situation in which decisions need to be made.

Motivation to apply the critical thinking competency is determined by the dominant value behind this type of thinking – and more specifically, the value behind it is ***freedom (desire to be independent in thinking)***. Activating the cognitive processes which are specific for this type of thinking is determined by a problematic situation which requires solutions and decision making. Generally, the capacity to formulate questions is a key to any critical thinker. The main reason for that being that asking questions is the main instrument for problematizing or challenging the situation, and to maintaining a high level of thinking at each of the thinking levels. Thus, one of the main objectives for critical thinking learning is developing the competency of "asking different types of questions for any situation or object of study".

Critical thinking competency is key for good citizenship and it is the public sector that can encourage good thinking among citizens by embedding it in their educational institutions, from primary to higher education and life-long learning programs.

Why developing critically-thinking citizenry is important?

- Critical thinking is particularly important for ensuring that voters make well-thought/considered decisions and are able to assess the wide spectrum of alternative policies proposed by the government.
- Critical thinking is important for ensuring that citizens demand more information, more data and are able to work with the data, thus contributing to shaping and co-creating the public policies at all levels: local, national, regional.
- Critical thinking helps citizens become more aware of the emerging issues, of the community problems, and be able to propose solutions and recommendations.
- Critical thinking is essential in countries which have adopted open government agendas – because in an open government agenda one needs both sides actively involved in policy dialogue: governments and the citizenry.
- When democracy is at stake, governments should have even a stronger interest in the promotion of critical thinking, and aspire to be more democratic than they are. Educating citizens to uphold to the principles of participatory and deliberative democracy is essential for an open government.

2. Attitudes, skills and knowledge necessary to develop the critical thinking competency – key six learning situations

Critical thinking competency departs from the higher order cognitive processes as per Bloom's Taxonomy[2], and each of these processes constitute a core part of the critical thinking competency. Each of the following cognitive processes requires specific attitudes, skills and knowledge:

- information/knowledge,
- understanding and interpretation,
- application,
- analyses,
- synthesis and
- evaluation

Below, are practical steps in developing each of the above core cognitive processes and ways public servants can practically and meaningfully develop critical thinking competency in order to be able to address the emerging challenges of the moment.

LEARNING SITUATION 1: Information and/or data collection from a critical thinking perspective

The first pre-condition for an independent decision making process is access to diverse sources of information. In order to be able to make a decision, a critical thinker needs information from diverse sources, often from contradictory sources. This is an important aspect, given that any text or source of information does already propose or give "a ready interpretation of the facts", thus, influencing, from the very beginning, the decision making process. This creates difficulties in generating alternative solutions or makes it almost impossible, even if we put in practice high-level cognitive processes.

A decision is 'suggested' by a certain information or source of information. This is done through the "selective" approach in data presentation, through the questions and the suggested answers and through the utilization of certain attitude related words (emotions, or words that are related to some values, which tend to exaggerate or diminish something), analogies, or comparisons that favors one option against the other.

[2] Blooms Taxonomy - http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/bloom.html

A critical thinker identifies alternative sources of information that present other perspectives and contradictions, thus, simplifying the process of differentiating between facts and interpretations, and proving a wider diversity of alternatives for the situation that needs to be solved. In most of the cases, collected information can be divided into two main categories: ***facts and interpretations.*** Questions for identification of missing facts are formulated based on the interpretations. Facts or interpretations that contradict each other are identified, and thus, the search for an objective identification of facts continues.

It is important to note that a critical thinker treats any situation as a new one, even if in the past he or she has confronted a similar situation. In decision-making, people are limited only by time and the environment, but any repeated situation is a motive to research once again the existent sources in order to collect the new facts that can change at any moment the previously made decision.

Cognitive actions that generate information and/or data collection:

- Remembering/recalling sources, facts and interpretations from personal experience;
- Recalling (identifying) sources, facts and interpretations from diverse sources;
- Observation and defining facts and interpretations;
- Classification, grouping and selecting sources, facts and interpretations;
- Registering facts and interpretations collected via different registration methods/means;
- Noting all ideas, facts and interpretations.

Thus, situations that require information/documentation or data collection require specific attitude, skills and knowledge. And more specifically:

Attitude: what does the learner believe in?!	**Skills: what is the learner able to do?!**	**Knowledge: what does the learner know?!**	**Associated meta-cognitive processes**
There is no black and white; acceptance of contradictory information. There are no 100% credible sources – any information needs to be checked, verified or compared with other sources, or with other data collection instruments.	Identify at least 2 contradictory sources of information for the same subject/issue. Apply at least 2 instruments for data collection; Distinguish between facts and assumptions, interpretations.	Ways to verify main sources of information, or information verification with the help of alternative instruments for data collection.	Suspending judgment/interpretation until information from contradictory sources has been verified, or information has been verified with the help of alternative instruments for data collection.

LEARNING SITUATION 2: Information and/or data interpretation from a critical thinking perspective

Understanding and expressing at least 2 different meanings or interpretations for data, events, experiences, situations, prejudices, understandings, believes, rules, procedures or criteria is at the core of this learning situation. A critical thinker needs at least 2 interpretations so that he/she is able to make comparisons between them, is able to get back to searching for more information, is able to review the values behind each interpretation – all these are extremely valuable for creating the premises for an independent decision making.

Hypothesis and assumptions emerge at this stage: they are ultimately tested, analyzed and justified.

The capacity to 'express/render the meaning of something' is tightly interrelated with the information interpretation process. Thus, a critical thinker is capable to explain the information to different target groups, by using different communication systems in order to assure the transfer of the information or of the key message. **Note:** this is particularly important in situations when public servants are responsible to conduct comprehensive consultation processes around Action Plans or other policy documents and address different target groups which are interested in the respective documents/policies.

A critical thinker needs adequate interpretation of information and data, in order to be able to negotiate and obtain the support of the community in favor of his/her decision. *There are several cognitive actions that serve as a basis for data and information interpretation:*

- Categorizing and reorganizing facts and interpretations having at the basis different criteria and classifications;
- Identifying (distinguishing) contradictions, gaps in the information under study/investigation;
- Translating facts and interpretations in other means or forms of communication (languages);
- Expressing facts and interpretations through other words, analogies, metaphors, etc.
- Illustrating (explaining) facts and interpretations through examples, graphics, drawings, etc.
- Redefining facts and interpretations;
- Predicting the consequences for each solution;
- Using the non-verbal communication for expressing the meaning of the information;
- Observing and interpreting reactions of the interlocutor (both verbal and non-verbal);

- Formulating clarification questions;
- Observing and naming both one's own and the interlocutor's thinking models (stereotypes).

Thus, similarly with learning situation 1, information/data interpretation require specific attitude, skills and knowledge. And more specifically:

Attitude: what does the learner believe in?!	**Skills: what is the learner able to do?!**	**Knowledge: what does the learner know?!**	**Associated meta-cognitive processes**
"Truth" is something relative and its relativity depends on the situation – works out differently in different situations.	Categorize facts and interpretations using different criteria and characteristics.	Main criteria for interpretation of information (age, experience, nationality, gender, religion, profession, location, etc.). Main criteria for the interpretation of "touchable/ measurable" type of information (distance, speed, weight, etc.)	Postponing the decision until I have 2 alternative hypothesis for the problematic situation. Postponing the presentation until I am convinced that can utilize at least 2 types of communication tools ...

LEARNING SITUATION 3: Information application – hypothesis and/or solutions' testing from a critical thinking perspective

A critical thinker values application/experimenting/piloting or testing a lot. He/she is fond of the application process very much mainly because this is the most effective way to test/check facts, hypotheses or any assumptions. A critical thinker does not believe until he/she "sees with his/her own eyes". A critical thinker plans and experimentally tests at least 2 hypotheses, even if the first experiment has met his/her personal expectations. As a result, we avoid on one hand, the most risky solutions and actions; while on the other hand, the decision is reviewed based on the results.

A critical thinker possesses the capacity to plan future actions, as well as to anticipate any risks associated with these actions.

Cognitive actions that generate application and testing of a hypothesis are:

- Visualization and description of the results of a successfully applied hypothesis;
- Description and implementation of all the steps according to an algorithm;
- Identification of the necessary means for application and testing of the hypothesis;
- Implementation of the algorithm/solution in a standard situation;
- Identification of an authentic situation in which the solution can be applied;

- Description of the success indicators necessary for implementing the solution;
- Observation and identification of errors in the implementation of the algorithm or of the solution.

Thus, similarly with learning situations 1 and 2, information/data application requires specific attitude, skills and knowledge. And more specifically:

Attitude: what does the learner believe in?!	**Skills: what is the learner able to do?!**	**Knowledge: what does the learner know?!**	**Associated meta-cognitive processes**
Testing at least 2 hypotheses contributes to improving the quality of the decision/s made. It is important to hold accountable for the results of the experiment (he/she finishes the experiment taking into account the intermediary results). It is valuable to accept and to register any alternative solutions that have emerged during the experiment or at the end of it.	Plan and check/test at least 2 hypotheses. Apply at least 2 instruments for testing a hypothesis. Anticipate risks. Adjust actions to the intermediary results of the experiment. Monitor and evaluate the project or the experiment.	Phases of a planning process and planning instruments. Main components of a project or of an experiment. Monitoring and evaluation tools of an experiment or project. Instruments for testing/application of diverse types of knowledge (be it of science or socio-humanistic nature).	Avoiding or postponing the risky behavior. The application process is being suspended if not all the risks have been taken into account. Distinguishing between real risks and un-real (imaginary) risks.

LEARNING SITUATION 4: Information analyses from a critical thinking perspective

Generally speaking, analysis is about structuring the content (be it of the problematic situation or of the object of study) into components (elements) and clarifying the relationship between them.

- The first step in content analysis is about identification of criteria for analyses: a critical thinker does not limit only to the identification of a single criteria, rather identifies at least 2 or 3 criteria;
- Based on the criteria, some indicators are formulated in order to be able to identify or describe specific elements of the problematic situation; or in order to be able to identify the specific elements of the content of the object under study;

- One of the main criteria used for analyses is validation of sources, facts and interpretations. Thus, facts and interpretations are corrected or investigated based on the application of additional research (data cleaning);
- Classification (structuring) and describing the content (situation) according to the identified criteria;
- Identification, categorizing, and describing the relationship between elements of the content (situation);
- Identification of facts that are missing in the existent arguments or of the necessary information needed for the formulation of the new arguments;
- Identification and formulation of the pro and against arguments for each hypothesis/solution, taking into account the result of the experiment;
- Reformulation of the assumptions, stereotypes, believes, opinions in complex arguments;
- Identification of commonalities and differences between diverse arguments, solutions and situations; and formulating new arguments;
- Identification of exceptions and reformulating them into arguments;
- Formulating and reformulating questions for identification of new arguments;
- Identification of contradictions and new problematic situations, which were not elucidated up to this moment;
- Identification of a “pro” argument for each “against” argument and vice versa, identification of “against” argument for each “pro” argument;
- Adjusting the language in which the arguments are presented (adjusting the codification system or of the utilized terminology).

Thus, similarly with learning situations 1, 2 and 3 information analyses require specific attitude, skills and knowledge. And more specifically:

Attitude: what does the learner believe in?!	Skills: what is the learner able to do?!	Knowledge: what does the learner know?!	Associated meta-cognitive processes
There should always be 'pro' and 'against' arguments for each hypothesis.	Use at least 2-3 criteria or techniques for situation's analyses; Formulate 'pro' and 'against' arguments for each hypothesis using different criteria and values; Identifies values behind arguments. .	Criteria for analyses; Techniques for analyses; Types of arguments; Techniques for analyses; Types of arguments; Structure of the arguments; Types of reasoning; General human values as a criteria for identification of arguments.	Making sure that there are pro and against arguments for each hypothesis.

LEARNING SITUATION 5: Identifying new solutions – or overcoming the stereotypes from a critical thinking perspective

This category of cognitive actions implies a high capacity of visualization of the situation under study (or of the problematic situation). The visualization takes the form of an integral system of constitutive elements with a relationship between them.

While in the previously described situations we 'manipulated' with the existent solutions (provided by the informational sources which are being studied), then the main goal of this learning situation is avoiding applying imposed stereotyped solutions. This means modifying or combining some elements of the situation, thus being able to 'plan' new situations. The type of 'manipulation' done in this case is with the new elements of the system (including introducing new elements into the system and expanding the system), forecasting changes between the elements of the system and in within the system as a whole. By changing the diverse elements of the problematic situation (or study), a critical thinker visualizes, plans, forecasts, and foresees the way in which the situation entirely changes… thus, identifying solutions for efficient improvement, etc.

A critical thinker does not 'stop' at the first solution he/she identifies, rather continues the thinking process until he/she manages to identify much more solutions for the situation under the study – at least 2 good solutions for every problem.

By identifying at least 2 good solutions a critical thinker avoids stereotypes (given that usually the first solution is a stereotyped one).

Cognitive actions that are at the basis of this specific competency:

- The attempt to integrate an absolutely new element (argument, proof) into the situation under study;
- Recombination of accidental elements into new forms;
- Forecasting diverse options for development and/or implementation of solutions;
- Conceptualizing – visualizing the situation from a more broader perspective in order to see new ways, new approaches;
- Changing the scope of the principle for organizing elements in a situation;
- Investigating the relationships between elements and changing the functions of particular elements of the situation under study;
- Changing the value of the different variables from the situation under study;
- Changing the values' priorities in the situation;
- Dividing the situation in small parts and identifying solutions for them;
- Increasing the degree of complexity/difficulty of the problem.

NB: Synthesis happens in a continuous intercalation with analyses.

Thus, similarly with learning situations 1, 2, 3 and 4 information analyses require specific attitude, skills and knowledge. And more specifically:

Attitude: what does the learner believe in?!	**Skills: what is the learner able to do?!**	**Knowledge: what does the learner know?!**	**Associated meta-cognitive processes**
There are at least 2 good solutions for any problem.	Apply diverse cognitive processes for identification of solutions.	Cognitive instruments for identification of solutions.	Suspending the decision making, even if there are 2 solutions which apparently seem to be equally good.

LEARNING SITUATION 6: Information and data evaluation from a critical thinking perspective

The cognitive process culminates at the evaluation stage/level, because that is the stage during which a decision is made. In order to make an independent decision, it needs to be made based on one's own values. At this very stage, another important process takes place: *a reevaluation of one's own values in order to adjust to the reality which is in continuous change.*

Cognitive processes that are at the basis of this specific competency:

- Identification of solutions' evaluation criteria;
- Identification of the values which are 'behind' each option;
- Identification and hierarchy of one's own values in relationship with the situation under the study;
- Valuing each argument and solutions from the perspective of the identified criteria;
- Evaluating the credibility of the statements and arguments or of the other types of communication that represent perceptions, experiences, situations, judgments, believes, opinions, etc.
- Identification of the logics and contradictions in the inferences or in the arguments;
- Presenting convincingly one's own decisions.

Similarly with previous five learning situations, information and data evaluation require specific attitude, skills and knowledge. And more specifically:

Attitude: what does the learner believe in?!	**Skills: what is the learner able to do?!**	**Knowledge: what does the learner know?!**	**Associated meta-cognitive processes**
It is important to change value priorities – meaning to change priorities. Each situation is unique and requires an individualized evaluation, and unique evaluation. Demonstration of respect towards others' positions at the behavioral level. Openness towards reviewing one's own arguments based on the new arguments.	Consciously rank and argument personal values based on the situation. The learner can present convincingly both in written and orally the decision made.	Personal values; Strategies for prioritization of personal values; Types/forms of oral and written presentations; Structure of a written or oral presentation; Arguments/techniques for oral and written presentation; Criteria for analyses and validation of arguments.	The decision made is based on the personal values. Suspending the judgment in case when one is not sure/convinced of the personal dominant value in the given situation.

3. Conclusions

Critical thinking competency is neither easy nor difficult to learn or acquire. It requires permanent exercising and practicing. Once acquired, implementation of tasks becomes easy, interesting and positively challenging, be it that you are a teacher, manager, or public servant.

Each and every one of us is confronted on a daily basis with situations in which we have to address new ***information, understand it, apply/use it, analyze it, be able to produce a synthesize and of course, to evaluate it***. Usually, we make decisions just based on the first or second cognitive process: based on the information we have just read or based on our immediate interpretation of this information. For a complete decision making process we need to go through all the cognitive processes enumerated above, otherwise, something will miss out in the entire process and will affect the quality of the decisions made.

In the public sector, where public servants are often 'afraid' or hesitant to interact with the citizens because they might be asking uncomfortable questions, critical thinking is a must.

The emerging democracies around the world have proven that the complexities of the world we are living in today have to be addressed constructively, holistically, comprehensively. And for this, we need new ways of thinking both on the sides of those who elaborate public policies and on the side of those who are affected by those policies.

65 Governments as of today have joined the ambitious movement of the Open Government Partnership and have thus, endorsed the principles of open government in their respective countries. One of the important pillars of the Open Government *is being citizen-centered, and engage citizens in consultations, decision-making processes* and making sure that all ideas are being explored. Governments committed to engage citizens meaningfully in the debates and public consultations, to harness the potential of the technology and bring more innovations into the development agenda, committed to combat corruption and become more transparent. For this great OGP platform[3] that aims at domestic reformers to develop and grow, it definitely needs critical thinking public sector reformers, who are able to challenge, assess, evaluate and generate non-standard solutions for the open government agenda. Open-minded government reformers, innovators, critical thinkers – are exactly the kind of government representatives needed today in order to be able to build an open government and develop citizenry which is able to think and engage in the policy making processes in their respective countries.

[3] http://www.opengovpartnership.org/

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About the Authors

Veronica Cretu is President of the Open Government Institute (Moldova). Veronica is a member of the civil society Steering Committee of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) since April 2013, and is a coordinator of the civil society working group on E-Government/Open Government (part of the Moldova National Participation Council). In addition to her work on Open Government, she has been actively engaged for the past 10 years in issues related to Internet Governance. Veronica is a member of the Multi-stakeholder Advisory Group (MAG) to the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and member of the Nominating Committee (NomCom) of ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbering). She is also a member of the Civil Society Advisory Group on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment to UN in Moldova. Veronica's background is in Diplomacy and IT with Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies of Malta. Veronica worked as an international expert in the field of education, particularly in critical thinking methodology, in countries such as Liberia, Turkey and Nepal (on behalf of Open Society Foundations).

Nicolae Cretu is Program Director with Open Government Institute (Moldova). Nicu has more than 15 years of work experience in both not-for-profit and business sector. He holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Leadership and Management with the Leeds Metropolitan University, UK and a Bachelor degree in Philosophy, with the State University of Moldova. Nicu worked as an international expert in critical thinking methodology for educational sector (for Open Society Foundations) in countries such as Liberia (West Africa), Mongolia and Nepal during 2007-2010. Nicu worked with Moldova Soros Foundation, Pro-Didactica Educational Center, Moldova Medical Foundation and International Development Partnership. Nicu provided consultancy and capacity building programs for numerous non-for-profit and private sector organizations from Moldova, Ukraine, Romania. His current areas of expertise include: Open Policy Making, Organizational Development, Critical Thinking Theories, Project Management and Project Evaluation, Adult Education (TOT), Communities of Practice, Leadership and community development.

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