

# Critical Thinking: The Enabler. Why Is It Vanishing?

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Critical thinking is the honest and structured challenge of ideas in pursuit of better outcomes. It is a capability for decision quality that tests information, identifies bias, weighs alternatives, and justifies choices based on logic and evidence rather than intuition or authority.

But a binary instinct narrows our thinking through polarisation. Partly because we need and want to belong, so we choose or inherit a camp. Partly because the brain naturally synthesises, classifying reality into recycled pathways. The polarised lens makes things simpler, and evolution has hard-wired it as a cognitive shortcut.

*The problem is when polarisation becomes tunnel vision disguised as intelligent assertiveness.*

Today, the phenomenon of polarisation tends to amplify beyond reason as our connection to the world is altered in two major ways: First, our sedentary lives narrow the sensory spectrum, and with it the perceptual freshness that the senses bring to cognition. Second, the commercial algorithms we are all increasingly exposed to are reinforcing our cognitive biases.

Polarisation of thoughts is a natural defaulting mode. It blocks critical thinking, and it grows further through the lack of critical thinking. Rebalancing starts with sensing more. But sustaining clear discernment also requires systems. *Sensory Leadership* is the discipline of engaging the senses before engaging the analytical mind. It does not bypass reason. It creates the conditions under which reason operates. The systems already exist; they need to be organised.

## AN OLD PROBLEM, REPEATEDLY FORGOTTEN

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Aristotle (ancient Greece) distinguished between *episteme* (scientific knowledge), *techne* (craft skill), and *phronesis* (practical wisdom). Modern management education has invested heavily in the first two. The third, the capacity for contextual judgement under genuine uncertainty, has largely been delegated to experience accumulation alone.

Cicero (Roman Republic) observed that the function of education was not to produce people who could repeat what they had been taught, but people who could reason about what they had not yet encountered. Seneca (Early Roman Empire) put it plainly: “*Non refert quam multos libros habeas, sed quam bonos.*” It does not matter how many books you have, but how good they are.

*The volume of information available has never been the problem. The discipline of discernment has.*

Spinoza (17th century) added the structural dimension: *sub specie aeternitatis*, under the light of eternity, our immediate certainties dissolve. In other words, every conviction we hold is a function of the position from which we hold it. The leaders who cannot metabolise a position contrary to their own conviction are not operating from strength. They are operating from a restricted perceptual bandwidth (explored in depth in the [Article](#) on adaptive management postures of our series on *Sensory Leadership*).

These principles were not obscure in their time. They are obscure now because the dominant trajectory of the last three decades of leadership development has moved in the opposite direction: toward personal brand, individual performance, and self-optimisation. Social media has accelerated this inward turn. The result is better-narrated individuals operating in teams with declining collective reasoning capacity. Skills become useful to a business when they are practised collectively, in real contexts, against real decisions.

## WHAT COUNTS MAY BE HARD TO MEASURE

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Robert McNamara, US Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam War, fell into a trap that has since carried his name. The McNamara Fallacy runs as follows: measure what is easy to count; ignore what is difficult to quantify; assume that what is not measured does not matter; then conclude that what is not measured does not exist. The result was a war directed by metrics that had no relationship to its actual outcomes.

Many corporate performance systems replicate this error with critical thinking. We measure outputs. We track activity. We rarely audit the quality of the reasoning that produced the decision in the first place. And today, the issue is even more prevalent because integrating AI without critical thinking amplifies the biases rather than correcting them.

Critical thinking does not appear on most performance frameworks as a named discipline. Yet it has measurable proxies. Governance and decision quality reflect whether reasoning is structured and challengeable. Human capital and diversity systems reflect whether the full range of perception is being gathered. Innovation and learning systems reflect whether structured dissent is permitted. Each of these already has a recognised international standard.

In practice, international standards (ISO) are still often approached as a box-ticking exercise to reassure stakeholders with a certificate. This is insufficient. Standards can also be leveraged, beyond mere certification, to deliberately support organisational priorities such as the creation of a context conducive to critical thinking through the auditable layers listed in the following table.

*A structured approach to Critical Thinking: existing ISO standards applied*

| Layer      | Capability                   | Standard  |
|------------|------------------------------|-----------|
| Culture    | Psychological safety         | ISO 45003 |
| People     | Diversity and inclusion      | ISO 30415 |
| Thinking   | Risk and decision quality    | ISO 31000 |
| Learning   | Knowledge and reflection     | ISO 30401 |
| Execution  | Innovation discipline        | ISO 56002 |
| Governance | Accountability and oversight | ISO 37000 |

*No single ISO standard addresses Critical Thinking directly. Yet the architecture already exists. The gap is sequencing and integration.*

In addition, ISO 26000, the international guidance standard on social responsibility, explicitly addresses organisational capacity to develop broader perspective-taking, to engage with the full ecosystem of stakeholders, and to build internal cultures of reflection and learning. Several of its core subjects, including human rights, community involvement, and organisational governance, depend precisely on critical thinking capabilities.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes that invest in environmental reporting but leave perceptual range and collective reasoning untouched are addressing symptoms while the underlying capability gap widens. Integrating *Sensory Leadership* into a company's CSR or human capital development initiative is a structural coherence argument: the same organisation that claims to engage responsibly with its ecosystem must also demonstrate that its teams can perceive that ecosystem accurately.

*Critical thinking is more than an extra skill. It is the enabling basis of a responsible, evolving enterprise. Its building blocks span every layer of a business.*

The business case is equally direct. Decision quality degrades when the range of perspectives feeding a decision narrows. Automation bias, the documented tendency to defer to algorithmic outputs even when they are demonstrably wrong, grows in direct proportion to the atrophy of independent perceptual skill.

The auditable tools exist. We have noted the enduring principles and the relevant ISO standards. The challenge is to apply them coherently, in practice.

## A SEQUENCED DISCIPLINE, NOT ANOTHER FRAMEWORK

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The world does not need more frameworks. It already has more than any leadership team can meaningfully apply. What most organisations lack is a platform for applying the most relevant tools in the right sequence, grounded in the actual perceptual state of the team, and anchored in real decisions rather than training scenarios.

One approach, grounded in neuroscience and applied in corporate settings, starts with the conditions under which existing tools become operationally useful: sensory engagement before analysis. This is the structural position of *Sensory Leadership*. Such programmes do not introduce new theories. They adopt a defined sequence: Diverge, Converge, Implement, Sustain. Each phase requires a different cognitive posture. Each posture is prepared, not assumed. Alignment then occurs on decisions: what to do, what not to do, and which trade-offs to accept. But the plurality of perceptions within a team is preserved.

What the *Sensagy*<sup>™</sup> leadership programme and *OlfaTeam*<sup>™</sup> project management format produce is a team with a broader and more honest perceptual map of its own reality (further developed in our [Article on Perception before Strategy](#)). That map is the foundation on which any strategy, framework, or execution discipline must be built. Without it, the most sophisticated tools produce the most confidently wrong answers.

The sensory opening of each module is not aesthetic. Neuroscience is consistent: olfactory stimuli reach the limbic system before the analytical mind can filter them, which means the team arrives at the framework without the defensive posture that structured performance environments typically produce.

We have always known, from Aristotle to Spinoza to current neuroscience, that the quality of human reasoning is a function of the conditions under which it is practised. It is the most operationally precise response available to the compression that AI and polarisation are producing simultaneously (this concept is developed in our [Article AI Raises the Floor, Not the Ceiling](#)).

The conditions are designable. Starting with the senses, then building on them with the right systems, is the only sequence that keeps critical thinking alive.

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If you recognise your organisation in any of these elements, the next step is a conversation.

Discover the full framework, including a whitepaper, programme descriptions, and the complete article series, at [sensoryleadership.org](https://sensoryleadership.org)

Contact Elixar at [projects@elixar.eu](mailto:projects@elixar.eu)

#SensoryLeadership #CriticalThinking #PerceptionBeforeStrategy #FutureOfWork #StayingHuman #DecisionQuality

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### **About the Elixar services**

*Elixar is the sole provider of comprehensive Sensory Leadership programmes — delivered in-presence, anywhere in the world, in English, French, and Italian. Programmes range from the full Sensagy™ journey (24 hours, six modules, spanning sensory awareness, direction-setting, and execution) to the focused OlfaTeam™ format (10 hours, five modules, anchored in olfactory practice and project management application) to keynotes and half-day interventions in retreats and seminars.*

[elixar.eu](http://elixar.eu)

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### **About the Founder of Elixar**

*Jeremy Leroux is a Managing Director and Strategy Advisor (Cert. MCI, California) with more than twenty years of international leadership experience in B2B industries spanning beverages, food ingredients, and pharmaceutical applications before deepening his practice into the world of perfumes (Cert. Olfactive Design, Politecnico di Milano). Having lived and worked across France, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, the United States, and Italy, he graduated in France as an Engineer and MSc in Food Processes and obtained an MBA in California. He founded Elixar on the conviction that sensory experience is and will be a foundation for the performance of humans and businesses.*

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