

# Practical Thinking

*A session from  
the Rx CD System*

**Rx**

# Practical Thinking:

The ability to make practical, common sense decisions; to see and understand what is happening in a common sense way.

## Why is this skill important?

People who are good at Practical Thinking can realistically identify problems and solutions in practical terms, rather than in theoretical or conceptual terms. They balance the need to get things done in a timely manner with getting things done in a quality manner.

The best Practical Thinkers focus the majority of their effort on the most important 20 percent of all initiatives and goals. They recognize that 80 percent of their time should be spent on those top 20 percent. Your success in choosing the most important 20 percent lies in your ability to analyze the current situation, establish what you want to see as an outcome, and gain support from critical resources to achieve those goals.

People who need to develop their skills in Practical Thinking may be unable to balance the need for timely work with the need for quality work, resulting in an excessive focus on time or quality. Too much attention to time means that the individual wants to get results, disregarding any need for accuracy, quality, or budgetary constraints. On the other hand, too much attention to quality may cause an individual to focus solely on achieving perfection, regardless of time or expense.

I'm sure you can think of people who seem to get bogged down in details—the person who stays far too late, "perfecting" documents that other people considered complete; the "nit-picker" who can't seem to be satisfied with anything anyone else does. And on the opposite pole, we all know someone who is so hard-nosed about getting results that he or she forgets completely to pay attention to accuracy, and blows the bank paying premium rates for quick-service.

Both of these individuals—the nitpicker and the results-pusher—have difficulty with one or more of the following traits that are required for good Practical Thinking:

1. The ability to anticipate potential opportunities and problems.
2. Sound problem-solving abilities.
3. A calm, cool approach to managing opportunities and problems.
4. Good follow-through.

In order to be truly effective at Practical Thinking, you must not only understand these traits, but develop them so strongly in yourself that they begin to feel natural to you. By then, Practical Thinking will be your instinctive response to opportunities

and problem situations—and you'll be much more capable and confident of getting quality results on time and within budgets!

## **What are skills associated with Practical Thinking?**

Someone who has mastered skills associated with Practical Thinking:

- Has the ability to look critically at current events and patterns of activities, anticipating potential opportunities and possible problems.
- Has developed his or her problem solving skills, approaching each new problem critically and analytically.
- Is confident in his or her own abilities to manage new situations, keeping calm and collected in stressful or busy times.
- Is organized and efficient about prioritizing and delegating responsibilities to ensure that key milestones are met and projects are finished on time.
- Sets realistic, achievable goals and objectives for him or herself and others based on careful analysis of existing workload, natural talents, and acquired abilities.

## **How do you develop your own skills in Practical Thinking?**

- Identify and utilize your unique strengths and those of your co-workers and department. Concentrate on using each person to the best effect for the overall project.
- Spend most of your energy on the strategic opportunities that are of most benefit to your organization and/or your project team or department.
- Look for new ways to use existing tools and personnel. Let personnel be involved in exploring their own limitations by trying new techniques or taking on different assignments that use familiar skills.
- Explore alternative courses of action for each problem or situation you come across.
- Break large projects into smaller tasks. Be realistic about what you can accomplish, and don't be afraid to delegate!
- Look at the effect of each potential on resources and personnel, and try to select the option that has the best long-term success prospects.
- Remember that quick fixes almost never really fix the problem—you'll just be dealing with it again soon if you don't get to the root of the problem and manage it effectively.
- Make sure you aren't "fighting a lot of fires"; instead, you should be dealing calmly but urgently with important issues.

- If you want to start a new project, and the idea requires buy-in from multiple functional groups in your organization, "pre-sell" the idea to key personnel in each department. Once you have their support, present your idea to the larger group.
- Set priorities for everything you do—it may help to look at your priority list every morning to see what shifts need to be made.
- If you are in charge of a project team, develop clear project plans and prioritize key activities for the team.
- Try to anticipate problem situations or opportunities before they arise—you will be dealing with a smaller problem than if you wait until the problem escalates or miss the opportunity.
- If groups within your organization have prevented your team from accomplishing goals, meet with key individuals in those groups to improve relationships.
- Discuss plans you create with other people and be open to their feedback.
- Network with other people across your organization. Develop relationships with key individuals, and share opportunities with them. It will help all of you reach your strategic goals more quickly and effectively.
- Develop strategic alliances with contacts in other organizations. You will get much-needed perspective and potentially valuable allies.
- Be creative! Make time for yourself to freely explore potentials and possibilities. We can get so mired down in reacting to the day-to-day routine that we forget to be creative and extend our limits.

# Practical Thinking Activities

## Activity 1: Fighting Fires

One key trait of good practical thinkers is that they spend more time working diligently toward important goals than they do "putting out fires," which are urgent but potentially less important in the long run.

Think about some recent "fires" you've put out. What were they? Why did they seem so important at the time?

"Fire":	Why was it so important at the time?
1. _____	_____
2. _____	_____
3. _____	_____
4. _____	_____
5. _____	_____

Now that some time has passed, and you are looking at an objective listing of the fires you put out, think about the following questions:

1. Could each of the fires been avoided or at least anticipated? How would/wouldn't that have changed things?
2. In retrospect, what do you think you SHOULD have been spending your time on, instead of putting out the fire?
3. How can you work toward anticipating "fires" that are in the works right now?

## **Activity 2: 80/20**

Make a list of all of the projects that are on your desk or that you know are pending. Be sure to include projects that have been assigned to you AS WELL AS projects you personally think are important for you to work on. List as many as you like.

The rule says that you should be spending 80 percent of your time on the most important 20 percent of your projects.

1. Do you know what your most important 20 percent are?
2. Do you spend 80 percent of your time on them? Why or why not?
3. What can you do to re-prioritize your projects?
4. Which projects can you delegate to someone else?
5. Which projects don't really need to be done?
6. Which projects should you ADD to your list?

## **Activity 3: Critique**

Think about someone you know who fits the description of each of the types of poor Practical Thinkers.

Type (a)— A person who pays too much attention to perfection, at the expense of time and money.

Type (b)— A person who rushes through projects to get results, at the expense of quality and sometimes money.

1. How does each person reveal his or her lack of Practical Thinking ability?
2. What kind of situations does he or she seem to get him or herself into?
3. If you could give him or her three pieces of advice about thinking more practically, what would they be?