

ACT

Actionable Critical Thinking

WHITE PAPER



SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
PROVIDENCE COLLEGE

What is ACT?

THE ABILITY TO THINK CRITICALLY GENERALLY CONSISTS IN A SET OF SKILLS OR DISPOSITIONS THAT MIGHT INCLUDE OPEN-MINDEDNESS, CURIOSITY AND DISCERNMENT, AND TALENT IN ANALYSIS AND COMMUNICATION. However, this set of skills and acquired dispositions is relatively rare. Even among college graduates, one study found four of 10 lack the complex reasoning needed for white-collar work.¹ It is therefore no surprise that, according to a recent survey, the most important competency businesses need in employees is “critical thinking.”² To bridge this gap, an interdisciplinary team of Providence College faculty and outside business professionals developed the Actionable Critical Thinking (ACT) Program. With a School of Business that is deeply integrated with the Liberal Arts, Providence College is uniquely well-suited to bring this type of program to fruition.

At the highest level, the ACT Program at Providence College is a series of management education workshops designed to instill a culture that fosters better decision-making and creates a more productive and satisfying workplace. These are ambitious objectives, but the unprecedented collaboration between humanities scholars and business professionals establishes an ongoing interaction among theory, ethics, applied science, and business practice that makes these goals achievable. Not that changing the way that people think is an easy proposition. However, through strong foundational development and a variety of application-oriented experiences, this program can make meaningful differences in how people think and interact.

¹ Belkin, Douglas (2015), “Test Finds College Graduates Lack Skills for White-Collar Jobs,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 16.

² “Employers Rate Career Competencies,” NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES AND EMPLOYERS, 12/2017.



TOGETHER, THESE PROVIDE A FOUNDATION FOR:

- Developing self-awareness
- Properly framing problems
- Separating the useful from the irrelevant and/or misinformation
- Effectively analyzing that information
- Acting with confidence

The ACT Program is predicated on the strong belief that critical thinking skills, which are innate in all people, can be developed and sharpened through engaged learning. The program provides a process and framework for evaluating incoming information, properly analyzing and distilling that information, and then persuasively communicating the resulting decisions to others. Its measured approach reduces the influence of poor quality information, while simultaneously helping overcome the systematic biases in processing information that inhibits good decision-making. Further, it improves the effectiveness of communication within teams by creating a more open culture of engagement.

Most important, ACT is not about abstract academic exercises. It is meant to be used. From foundation to outcome, emphasis is always on how ACT impacts actual, everyday decision-making. It teaches a mind-set that is thoughtful and self-aware, but also action-oriented.

THIS WHITE PAPER DESCRIBES THE ACT PROGRAM FROM FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES TO THE OUTCOMES REALIZED THROUGH PARTICIPATION.





Why is it IMPORTANT?

IN THEORY, MORE INFORMATION IMPROVES DECISION-MAKING, AND TECHNOLOGY HAS PLACED A WORLD OF INFORMATION AT OUR FINGERTIPS. The reality is that increasing information flows coincide with decreasing time available to use that information. So an information-rich environment, unless accompanied by increased time to peruse, filter, and process data, encourages managers to rely too much on short cuts and intuition, and the benefits of the information boom are not realized.

A key component of critical thinking is the assessment of the quality of information in order to focus on what is

valuable while disregarding that which is less so. Initially, this filtering process slows down decision-making, which is anathema to today's business environment. Traditionally, cognitive science suggests a tradeoff between speed and error, i.e., the faster one goes the more one makes mistakes. However, within certain boundaries, this relationship may not hold. While increasing speed of decision-making initially decreases decision quality, with enculturation and practice, assessment of incoming information becomes second nature and, thus, much faster. Anyone who has learned to drive a car can relate to the challenges faced as a novice that seem effortless to the skilled driver.

It has been argued that critical thinking just means applying reason to decision-making. Unfortunately, this is insufficient for dealing with the complexities of the information environment where emotion, hidden agendas, and persistent human cognitive biases all inhibit the usefulness of pure reason. Rather than ignoring these factors, critical thinkers must learn how to explicitly acknowledge and engage with them in their environment and seek an understanding that helps to moderate potential negative effects.

Integrated within our concept of critical thinking is an open discussion of the ethical implications of our deliberative environment. Most business ethics programs impose

a variety of external ethical frameworks onto the decision process. ACT takes a different approach. As part of this program, we consider the ethical requirements and implications of deliberation as a social practice. This allows us to see ethical commitments as intrinsically connected to improved critical thinking, and therefore a necessary part of an improved decision procedure.

As noted previously, thinking critically is of limited value in the workplace if there is no direct connection to actual application. Focused attention on action-oriented, experiential curriculum and outcomes create deeper, ingrained learning that has staying power over time.





How is ACT structured?

OUR FIRM BELIEF IS THAT A SOLID FOUNDATION CAN BE BUILT ON CERTAIN CLASSICAL TEACHINGS. The ACT program borrows heavily from a canon of works that are as relevant today as when they were written two millennia ago. Through the interpretations of expert humanities scholars who are also well-versed in the current business environment, the lessons of Plato and Aristotle are explored in today's context. For instance, Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" calls attention to the perils of a "post-truth" society where flows of information to the populace are controlled and distorted. Understanding how Aristotle structured arguments and exposed fallacies provides direct application to businesspeople evaluating proposals or sales pitches. Understanding the elements of persuasion outlined by Aristotle is especially beneficial in crafting effective communication both within an organization and with outside stakeholders.

While the classics can provide an excellent foundation, we also incorporate advances in the relatively new field of cognitive science that inform our understanding of how the

mind interacts with the external environment to evaluate and process new information. Kahneman, Tversky and other behavioral scientists have demonstrated that humans use heuristics (shortcuts) to efficiently manage the information environment. Some of these shortcuts distort our perception of incoming information, while others consist of sub-optimal or ineffective processes, but both potentially lead to predictable, and serious, errors in judgment. The most effective means of combating these cognitive biases is fully understanding when and why they appear, and developing a level of self-awareness that allows for recognition and correction of these distortions.

Building on this foundational structure is the practical experience that begins to cement a more engaged and less passive approach to decision-making. For example, the theory of argumentation is developed into the practice of argumentation through deep reading and analysis, and structured case discussion. Similarly, persuasion theory is put into practice through critical analysis and debate.

ACT as a culture.

ENGAGEMENT AND PRACTICE LEAD TO MUCH HIGHER LEVELS OF RETENTION, BUT THESE ARE ONLY INTERMEDIARY OBJECTIVES. The ultimate goal is to create a culture of ethical critical thinking that positively impacts the entire workplace.

A key component of ACT and an essential element of the ACT culture is transparency. This means explicit acknowledgement of assumptions and presumptions in the context of a trusting deliberative environment. More uncomfortably, at least to begin with, a culture infused and informed by the ACT principles creates an expectation of self-awareness that expresses itself as an openness to explicit challenges of our own flaws and biases. This is especially discomfiting in cultures that are very hierarchical and/or, using Hofstede's categorization, highly "masculine."³ In such cultures, significant deference is given to information that is confidently presented irrespective of its actual value. While the open questioning of decision procedures can produce defensiveness, this should be overcome in the pursuit of better decision outcomes.

The difficulty arises in creating a way of interacting we call "productive disagreement." Disagreement, in many contexts, produces unpleasant feelings of stress and conflict. These are most often associated with a personal sense of vulnerability. In a cohesive team environment, team members understand the primacy of the group's success over the individual's psychic peace. Successfully developing the proper culture, however, creates a norm of challenge as opposed to a norm of silence and deference. The expectation then becomes "how can I help the team make a better decision?" rather than "how can I keep my feelings from getting hurt?"



³ Hofstede, Geert (1984). *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (2nd ed.). Beverly Hills CA: SAGE Publications.



Outcomes associated with ACT.

THERE IS NO DENYING THAT PEOPLE CAN MAKE DECISIONS WITH VERY LITTLE THOUGHT AT ALL. On a trip to the horse track, you could pick a winner based on the color of the jockey's silks. Of course, you'd realize that it was luck and you would be unlikely to continue winning with that strategy. Critical consideration of relevant information reduces the reliance on luck and greatly improves the odds of making the right decision. The ACT program teaches the elements of a constructive, deliberative approach to decision making that yield superior results and fewer errors than our natural, haphazard tendencies.

More than just good decision-making, ACT teaches the development of argumentation that allows practitioners

to communicate more persuasively, clearly and concisely. As such, informational inputs are better vetted and more systematically analyzed and information outputs are more effectively received by others.

Feedback from class participants showed that some reported increased levels of self-awareness and self-assuredness by the end of the program. Being a better judge of the information that is inundating us provides an increased confidence that we will not be taken advantage of by those who seek to influence us for their own benefit.



WE
MAKE
— A —
GREAT
TEAM



More Information

WE WOULD BE PLEASED TO DISCUSS OUR ACT PROGRAM. Options exist for individual participants or we will work with you to create context-specific programs for teams. Please contact Dan Horne, Associate Dean of the Providence College School of Business at 401-865-2722 or dhorne@providence.edu



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