

INTRODUCTION

Brilliant Nonsense: Example #1

Steve Jobs, the brilliant co-founder and CEO of Apple Inc., significantly impacted six industries: animated movies, computers, music, phones, tablet computing and digital publishing. As I write, Apple ranks as the world's most valuable company (measured by market capitalization). So whenever you use a Mac computer, iPhone, iPad, iPod, or iTunes, credit Steve Jobs and his brilliant associates.

But his decisions weren't always brilliant.

When Jobs, ever the perfectionist, aspired to build a new headquarters, he chose what he considered the top architectural firm in the world and agonized alongside the architects with every detail. After they agreed upon the drawings, he brought them home to show his family over dinner.

Far from being impressed, his son Reed joked that the aerial view looked like male genitalia. Initially, Jobs dismissed the comment as a typical product of a teen mind. But the next day, to his horror, he realized his son was right. The experts changed the design.¹

So why did one of the top business leaders in the world, working with elite architects, fail to notice something so significant? Why couldn't the experts see, after endless dreaming and drawing, what a teen casually noticed over supper?

Brilliant Nonsense: Example #2

A band played their hearts out for years. Their fans loved them, but their manager had contacted and been rejected by every record label in the industry catalog.²

Why the rejection? Some industry leaders believed that the public's taste in music had shifted from groups to solo singers. Decca Records at least allowed them to audition, but rejected them, in part because groups with guitars were considered "on the way out." None could envision such a band producing significant sales.³

The year was 1962. The band was *The Beatles*. They were eventually signed by a small, struggling label and quickly rose to become the most popular band in history, selling over a billion units worldwide. And contrary to the industry experts, five decades down the road, bands with guitars are as popular as ever.

Smart people often form wrong opinions and make stupid decisions. This book examines the mental flaws that informed their decisions—decisions that make or break businesses, relationships, and lives.

Put more positively, I aspire to help us think more clearly and creatively, resulting in better decisions and cutting-edge innovation.

The Languishing Art of Thinking

Both IBM and Apple were driven by their mottos:

IBM - "Think"

Apple - "Think Different"

The day they forget those mottos will be the day they begin their descent into irrelevance.

Unfortunately, the science and art of thinking is often relegated to a sideshow in contemporary education. As one pundit put it, "Today's education consists of transferring a set of notes from the teacher to the student, without going through the minds of either." For many students, a decent rote memory suffices to regurgitate the facts on test day.

Thus, we memorize the Kings of England without debating the pros and cons of monarchies, failing to consider how those insights might help us to better run a business, or a country. We memorize the events of World War II, leading up to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but fail to grapple with the moral issues involved with a decision that obliterated 200,000 people, many of them civilians.

Was it justified? On what grounds? When a professor asked his bright graduate students these questions, some (from countries where vast rote memorization produced high test scores) responded with blank faces and a desperate plea: "Tell us the answer and we'll memorize it!"

As novelist Dorothy Sayers lamented, many students never master "the lost tools of learning," such as sound research and critical thinking. They're introduced to a short list of subjects, but graduate without the tools to master a new subject.⁴

Yet the ability to master new information and explore new fields is critical at a time when last year's knowledge may be irrelevant to solve this year's problems.⁵ As philosopher Eric Hoffer put it,

"In times of profound change, learners will inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists."

What's at Stake?

If we fail to learn these skills, and neglect to sharpen them throughout our lives, we're easy prey for the schemers, the charlatans, the cult leaders, the get-rich-quick presentation that seemed brilliant at the seminar, but disastrous after the investment.

The stakes in weighing evidence are high. Do I marry her or not? Do I trust the traditional doctor or the herbalist? Will the vaccination more likely save me or kill me? Is marijuana relatively harmless, or a potentially addicting motivation killer? Should I become a plumber or a philosopher...or neither...or both?!? Life's most important questions are answered by acquiring relevant, accurate information and drawing valid conclusions from it.

The Payoff

This book intends to sharpen your thinking skills. Those who engage deeply enough to understand, internalize and apply the skills should find themselves:

- Thinking more clearly.
- Leading more effectively.
- Innovating more creatively.
- Seeing through the common deceptions of advertisers and salesmen.
- Simplifying complex and convoluted arguments.
- Managing life's decisions more confidently.
- Expressing convictions more powerfully.
- Becoming indispensable to the business community.

Why Critical* and Creative* Thinking?

Underscoring the need for both critical and creative thinking in business, consider these challenges from two recent *Harvard Business Review* articles:

- "If you want to succeed in 21st Century business you need to become a critical thinker."⁶
- "A company's most important asset isn't raw materials, transportation systems, or political influence. It's *creative capital*—simply put, an arsenal of creative thinkers whose ideas can be turned into valuable products and services. Creative employees pioneer new technologies, birth new industries, and power economic growth. Professionals whose primary responsibilities include innovating, designing, and problem solving—the creative class—make up a third of the U.S. workforce and take home nearly half of all wages and salaries. If you want your company to succeed, these are the people you entrust it to."⁷

***Critical Thinking** = the process we use to analyze and evaluate propositions.

***Creative Thinking** = the process we use to create and develop unique ideas.

A survey of over 1,000 people who hire for various industries, conducted by the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Universities, asked respondents to rank the importance of various competencies for the future. They ranked "novel and adaptive thinking" first, for both "current importance" and "future importance."⁸

Taught in isolation, critical thinking can become a rather negative, snooty enterprise. So beyond using critical thinking to reveal the flaws in a proposed solution, businesses want innovators

who can use both critical *and* creative thinking to propose better solutions. As we shall see, in real life decisions, both are integrally entwined.⁹

Why Focus on the Shortcomings of the Brilliant?

Because it's both entertaining and instructive. *Entertaining* because it's quite amazing to watch brilliant people do dumb things; I suppose it makes us intellectual mortals feel better about ourselves. *Instructive* in that it helps us to see the subtlety of error. If the brilliant can be led astray, how much more vigilant should the rest of us be?

Why Me?

Having successfully navigated three diverse undergraduate schools and two graduate schools, I've picked up a few tips on how to reap the most out of formal education. But after graduation I found myself learning outside the university, zealously seeking the wisdom to navigate challenges in my shifting careers and personal life. I've dedicated my best years to equipping and inspiring young people and their leaders both nationally and internationally.

But more importantly, I'm addicted to learning! When I encounter important issues that impact me and my family, I can't rest until I've sufficiently studied them. These issues often lead me into various fields—science, philosophy, history, literature, psychology, etc. And I can't resist a biography of an interesting person, whether a political leader, innovator, business success, writer, musician or intellectual. From this wide reading, I gather relevant and entertaining examples of creativity and faulty reasoning. I hope that my lifelong enthusiasm for learning is contagious!

A Bias Toward the Practical

In raising my own children and teaching students at Kennesaw State University, I'm constantly challenged to transform the complicated and obtuse into something clear, memorable, and practical.

To succeed in life, we need to learn proper nutrition and exercise, how to make relationships work, how to run a business, how to deal with failure, how to make moral decisions, and how to vote wisely in a democracy. Yet, how do we separate fact from fiction when thousands of conflicting voices authoritatively urge us to practice nonsense?

That's the essence of this book—finding wisdom and avoiding nonsense.

I major on the practical—stuff you can actually use in daily life. And rather than just spoon-feeding simplistic answers, we'll wrestle together over important issues that challenge us to think. Often the solutions aren't so black and white and may involve as much creativity as logic.

And since no political party or worldview holds a monopoly on clear thinking, I'll try to be even handed when I critique what I deem to be nonsense. Whether I read Republicans or Democrats, traditional doctors or alternative doctors, atheists or theists, conservatives or liberals, there's

plenty of nonsense to draw from, so I'll strive for balance.

Since I'm rather eclectic, I'll draw illustrations from various fields—from football to physics, from music to intellectual history. Hopefully, the variety will help produce more "Aha!" moments than yawns.

And since specifics are more enlightening (and entertaining!) than generalities, I often refer to arguments made by real people. In doing so, I don't intend to show disrespect for these individuals—merely disrespect for their arguments. I sincerely hope I've not misunderstood or misrepresented anyone. If I have, those errors will reinforce my point that we need to think for ourselves rather than put blind faith in experts, even if that "expert" is me.

(Please do let me know where I've unwittingly spouted nonsense, so that I can make corrections in future revisions. I'm at jstevemiller@gmail.com.)

The Content

In a typical chapter, I tell stories of blunders made by bright people, invite readers to reflect with me upon the causes, suggest ways to avoid them, and finally discuss ways to think more creatively in the subject area.

To help students engage their higher level thinking, I ask thought questions and recommend further paths to explore. Those wishing to expand on certain ideas might also find help in the extensive endnotes.

Teachers may wish to assign select chapters that they deem most relevant to their students and goals. (See the Table of Contents for descriptions of each chapter.) I provide teaching tips, extensive lesson plans, and presentations, all free on the accompanying website:

www.criticalcreativethinking.wordpress.com

So let's dive in and sharpen our ability to think...and think different!

J.S.M. - Kennesaw State University, Spring 2015

Tip for Students

To get the most out of this book, read a chapter long before your class and write down your takeaways. In this way, by the end of the book, you can consolidate your practical wisdom into ten or so goals, so that your reading can more easily result in life change.

Reading a chapter early allows time to reflect upon the content and apply it to life. You'll likely see the principles operating in your other classes, in conversations with friends and family, or in the dialogue of a movie or TV show. Give yourself time to reflect, and you'll find yourself thinking more critically and creatively in daily life, which is the purpose of this book.