

FOUR SECONDS

How careful people get things confidently wrong.

A twenty minute working session on critical thinking



Three parts, and nothing gets collected

1 Two questions

Sixty seconds. No calculators, no phones, no talking.

2 Why you got them wrong

Four minutes. The interesting part is not the answers.

3 An honest look inward

Twelve minutes. Twenty four items on how you currently think.

Two rules

Nothing you write is collected. Not by me, not by HR, not by your manager. The handout goes home with you. That is not a courtesy, it is the condition that makes the third part worth doing.

Go fast. On every item, score your first instinct. If you find yourself deliberating over an item, you have stopped scoring and started building a defence.

Two questions. Sixty seconds.

No calculators. No phones. No talking. Write an answer to both.

1

A folder and a pen cost \$1.10 together. The folder costs \$1.00 more than the pen. How much does the pen cost?

2

If 5 people close 5 files in 5 days, how many days would it take 100 people to close 100 files?

Write both before anyone says anything out loud.

The answers

Check them against what you wrote before I explain anything.

5 cents

Not 10

- Pen = \$0.05
- Folder costs \$1.00 more = \$1.05
- Together: $\$1.05 + \$0.05 = \$1.10$

The tempting answer is 10 cents, but then the folder would cost \$1.10, making the total \$1.20.

5 days

Not 100

Each person closes one file in five days. A hundred people close a hundred files in the same five.

Wrong answers do not arrive feeling wrong.

There was no moment of doubt. No flicker. It presented itself as an answer, with the same confidence a right answer would have carried, and that is the whole problem.

The word doing the damage is "more". It signals a relationship between two unknowns, and fast thinking flattens it into a fixed value. Your brain heard "a dollar and change" and split \$1.10 into its two visible parts. The dollar has to be shared between the two items, not handed entirely to the folder. It is a division that felt like a subtraction.

The exercise is not about arithmetic. It is about the missing signal.

Twenty four items, four blocks of six

You score it. Nobody collects it. Score behaviour from the last thirty days, not intention.

1**PAUSE**

Items 1 to 6

Do you slow down when it counts? This is about the switch, not about speed.

2**EVIDENCE**

Items 7 to 12

How you handle information, and particularly information that disagrees with you.

3**PERSPECTIVE**

Items 13 to 18

Whether you go looking for the view that contradicts yours, or wait for it to find you.

4**RECEPTION**

Items 19 to 24

What happens in the moment someone tells you that you are wrong. Last on purpose.

Workbook pages 4 and 5. Seven minutes. Score 1 to 5, first instinct, and keep moving.

Reading what you just wrote

These bands describe a habit, not a person. A low block is a skill you have not built yet.

25 to 30**A strength**

Consistent enough to rely on. This block is quietly covering for your lowest one.

19 to 24**Situational**

You do this when you remember to. The gap is consistency, which is a trigger problem, not a skill problem.

13 to 18**Developing**

One deliberate habit here would pay off faster than anything else on the page.

6 to 12**Highest leverage**

Not a character flaw. You have never had a reason to build this, and now you have a number that says so.

The finding is the spread

The gap between your highest and lowest block tells you more than either number on its own. That is why there is no total.

Honesty check

If every block came out above 24, read items 8, 14, 21 and 22 again. Those four are the hardest on this instrument to score high honestly.

Your lowest block is the assignment

One behaviour, for thirty days. Not four.

PAUSE

Before any decision that is hard to reverse, write it in one sentence and wait one hour before you send it.

EVIDENCE

For one week, every time you read something you already agree with, ask who produced it and what they were optimizing for.

PERSPECTIVE

Before you decide, say the strongest argument against your position out loud. Out loud, not in your head.

RECEPTION

The next time someone tells you that you are wrong, say "say more" before you say anything else.

Write it on the handout with a day attached. One behaviour beats four intentions by a distance.

ARGUMENT ONE

You are the last check

Below your level, someone reviews the work. At your level, someone reviews the outcome.

What used to catch you

A PO that needed a signature. A cycle count. A credit hold. A second look at a price override. The system was built with checkers in it, and they caught things.

What catches you now

Your regional reviews the P&L, not the reasoning behind it. Nobody above you knows why you went deep on that SKU or extended those terms. If your thinking is flawed, nothing surfaces it until the season closes, and by then it is not a thinking problem, it is a number.

ARGUMENT TWO

The failure mode changes shape

The errors you were trained to prevent are not the errors that will find you now.

BELOW YOUR LEVEL

A wrong answer to the right question

Visible. Correctable. A cycle count finds it, or the customer calls. This is what counts, order confirmations, and credit checks are designed to catch.



AT YOUR LEVEL

A flawless answer to the wrong question

Invisible to review, because nothing about it looks wrong. The margin held. The count cleared. It passes every control we have, and it was never the decision that mattered.

The pre-season order you just approved was the second kind.

SIDE BY SIDE

Two different skills

	CRITICAL THINKING	STRATEGIC THINKING
Question	Is this sound?	Where should we be, and what do we give up to get there?
Input	A proposal that already exists	An environment, with no proposal yet
Direction	Tests what is in front of you	Imagines what is not in front of you
Output	A judgment	A choice, and a sacrifice
Horizon	The decision on your desk	Three to five years
Core skill	Evaluation	Synthesis and trade-off
Failure mode	Precisely right about small things	Confident direction on unexamined assumptions
You find out	Fast, when the decision blows up	Slowly, when the business has drifted

ADKAR: Where Does Change Actually Stall?

WORKBOOK P. 7

The plan tells you what to do. ADKAR tells you why people aren't moving, including you.



Awareness

Do they know WHY? Do you?



Desire

Do they WANT to? What's in it for them?



Knowledge

Do they know HOW to do it?



Ability

Can they actually DO it yet?



Reinforcement

What makes it stick?

Change stalls at the **first letter people are missing**. Find that letter before you push harder. The gap is often **Desire** and you cannot train your way out of a desire problem. That takes a conversation.

Self-check: which letter is your team stuck on? Which letter are **you** stuck on?

The Conversation You're Avoiding

Get honest about the one you keep postponing.

ONE MIRROR

The hardest conversations are usually the ones we have quietly decided not to have. Start there.

- 1 The talk** Which difficult conversation have you been putting off?
- 2 The story** What story are you telling yourself about why now is not the right time?
- 3 The cost** What is the avoidance actually costing and who else is paying for it besides you?
- 4 The evidence** When did a hard conversation go better than you feared?

Your turn (2 min): *write your answer to #1 in one clear sentence. Be specific.*

Key Drivers: Why the Hard Talk Works

A few truths that make difficult conversations land and what they sound like.

THE SHIFT

Move from winning the moment to owning the outcome. These five shifts get you there.

- 1 What you ignore, becomes more** The problem you did not name last quarter is the one you are managing today. Small and early beats big and late.
- 2 Blame vs. accountability** Blame asks whose fault it was. Accountability asks what happens now and who owns it. Only one moves work forward.
- 3 Identity vs. Role** People hear feedback on the role as a verdict on the person. Say which one you mean, and say it out loud.
- 4 Get decision clarity when delegating** When are you unclear about who makes the decision? Who decides, who is consulted, who is just informed.
- 5 "I need your help."** Four words that open a hard conversation as a partnership instead of an ambush. Use them more often.

What you ignore becomes more. *What you name becomes manageable.*

Why You Avoid It: Name Your Pattern

Avoidance is rarely laziness. It is a strategy that used to work. Which one is yours?



The Peacekeeper

Keeps it pleasant; says it is “not the right time.”

Cost: *Small issues compound into quiet resentment.*



The Over-Explainer

Softens and cushions until the message disappears.

Cost: *They leave unsure what actually needs to change.*



The Bulldozer

Delivers it fast and hard, just to get it over with.

Cost: *They defend themselves instead of hearing you.*



The Hoper

Waits and hopes the problem fixes itself.

Cost: *You teach the team that standards are optional.*

Pick the one that stings a little. *That is probably yours. What has it cost you in the last 90 days?*

Five Rules for the Room

1. **Get clear on your own outcome before you open your mouth.** Not "I need to have a talk with him".... That is a feeling, not an objective. What do you want to be true when this conversation is over? If you cannot answer that, you are not ready.
2. **Name the elephant.** "I have something on my mind and honestly I'm not sure how to say it without it landing wrong." That kind of mild vulnerability disarms defensiveness faster than any polished script. It signals you are not there to win.
3. **Ask before you tell.** Lead with questions, not verdicts. "Walk me through how you saw that playing out" gets you the other person's reality before you impose yours, and half the time it changes what you were going to say.
4. **Kill the feedback sandwich.** People hear the bad news, discard the bread, and trust you a little less for the maneuver. Straight talk delivered with evident care beats a sandwich every time.
5. **You are not responsible for their reaction.** You are responsible for delivering the message honestly and respectfully. If they get upset, that's information, not failure. Executives who internalize this stop avoiding.

A Conversation You Can Run Tomorrow

WORKBOOK P. 12

Open with an Up-Front Contract.

THE UP-FRONT CONTRACT

"I'd like ten minutes on something that matters to me. I'll be straight with you, I want to hear your side, and we'll land on a next step together. Fair?"

- 1 Set the frame** Purpose + permission
- 2 Name it straight** One clear sentence. No sandwich. "Here's what I'm seeing..."
- 3 Ask, then listen** "Walk me through how you saw it." Get their reality first.
- 4 Co-create the step** What changes, by when, owned by whom.
- 5 Confirm & close** "What did we agree?" Say it back. End clean.

Their reaction is information, not failure. *Your job is honest and respectful, not comfortable.*

When the Talk Doesn't Happen

Everything we just practiced has a flip side. Here is what avoidance actually does.

THE LINK

The conversation you keep postponing does not disappear. It moves in, takes up residence, and shows up as stress and anxiety.

- 1 It compounds** The unsaid problem keeps running in the background, draining focus every day you carry it.
- 2 It leaks** What you will not say comes out sideways: in your tone, your tension, the sleep you do not get.
- 3 It stays undefined** Anxiety thrives on the undefined. Naming the conversation is the first step to relief.

So let's name stress and anxiety directly. *Same skill: name it, then act on it.*

Stress & Anxiety

Before we manage it, let's locate it. Sit with these four for a moment.

START HONEST

You cannot manage what you have not named. Same rule as the hard conversation.

- 1 Where**
Where does your stress or anxiety live? Name the place in your body or your week it shows up.
- 2 What**
What does it feel like? Put words to it: tight, racing, heavy, foggy.
- 3 How**
How does it spread? What does it touch once it starts: sleep, focus, patience, the people near you?
- 4 Peace**
What does peace feel like for you? You need a target to move toward.

No fixing yet (2 min): *just notice and name. Awareness is the whole job here.*

Anxiety vs. Stress

Related, but not the same. Naming which one you are in changes how you treat it.

Anxiety

Worry, nervousness, or unease, usually about something imminent or an uncertain outcome.

In short: *Worry about what might happen.*

Stress

Mental or emotional strain from demanding or adverse circumstances; the load you carry now.

In short: *Strain from what is happening.*

The move is the same: *name which one you are in, then give it somewhere to go.*

Two Types of Stress

Not all stress is bad. The skill is telling them apart and rebalancing toward the first.

Eustress (+)

The good kind. Energizing pressure that sharpens focus and pushes growth.

Shows up as: *Excitement, motivation, a healthy edge.*

Distress (-)

The draining kind. Pressure that overwhelms and wears you down over time.

Shows up as: *Overwhelm, fatigue, dread.*

Aim for more eustress: *same pressure, reframed toward challenge and growth.*