

**If...then**

# Critical Thinking Tutorials

## Business Series



Being Critical  
of Evidence I

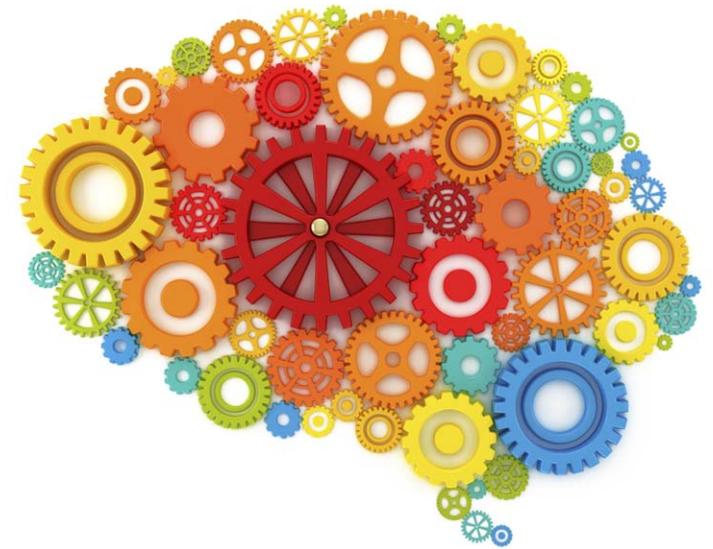
## if...then

If...then provides free resources in PDF form that businesses can use.

This PDF is the first in a series that will look at some recent claims (normally evidence) that have been made that are relevant to business and management.

You can use the PDFs in a number of ways. These include the following:

- to add to your knowledge of recent business and management evidence;
- to develop/reinforce your skills in evaluating evidence that is relevant to business and management;
- to provide discussion material for staff training in thinking critically.



## Critical Thinking?

Critical Thinking is concerned with the significance of claims that are made - it is a questioning way of thinking. By asking questions, we try to make things clearer. By making things clearer, we can make judgements as to the quality of claims that are made and any judgements that are made from them.

# BEING CRITICAL OF EVIDENCE I

This material looks at some evidence on meetings and asks questions about what it might be telling us.

In April 2012, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) met in Singapore. The main theme of the meeting was the response that the IMF should make to the international economic crisis. At the following press briefing, the Chairman of the International Monetary and Financial Committee, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, expressed his satisfaction that there was a 'very strong consensus...in our discussions on the need for everything that we do to be supportive of medium-term fiscal consolidation'.

Christine Lagarde, the Managing Director of the IMF, paid tribute to the Chairman for his role in helping the meeting to achieve useful discussions. But she very much also paid tribute to Singapore itself for getting the meeting to do business 'the Singapore way'. This was described in terms of the seating arrangements. Instead of there being a 'huge, big round of tables' which is 'relatively hostile in essence because everybody is protected behind their table', 'we had chairs', so 'it was much more fluid.' Madame Lagarde developed this point further. 'People were much more in each other's face (*sic*) and posture, which was extremely good for the dialogue that we had.'



It's obvious that Mme Lagarde saw the successful outcome of the IMF meeting as being in large part due to this 'Singapore way'. The implication is clear: if those at the IMF meeting had been seated behind tables, the outcome would have been very different. (There could have been no agreement, only limited agreement, or perhaps agreement would have taken much longer.)

However, was it that simple? We have here a good example of a big assumption being made (in the critical thinking sense of a necessary but unstated claim\*): there was no other explanation for the success of the meeting.

So what other explanations might there be?

- Perhaps there would have been agreement anyway, given the need for a strategy to deal with pressing problems of fiscal and structural reform.
- Perhaps the agenda was such that no serious controversies were likely.
- Perhaps Mme Lagarde herself was a very successful advocate for preferred courses of action.
- Perhaps, as Mme Lagarde herself stressed, the Chairman (Mr Tharman) was the main cause of the success, such that the seating arrangements were incidental to the process.

The central issue here is that we cannot know if the seating arrangements made the difference to the successful outcome of the meeting. It might be that they contributed at most a little but no more than this.

\* For further information on the meaning of the term 'assumption' in critical thinking, see pages 33-38 of 'Critical Thinking for Students' by Roy van den Brink-Budgen.



From a critical thinking perspective, we can use this example to raise a number of specific questions.

- Are there advantages in having meetings in which people sit behind tables?
- Can we generalise from this IMF meeting in Singapore to other meetings?
- Can we generalise from 'the Singapore way' to other contexts?
- Can we generalise from a meeting of the IMF to other meetings? (For example, the IMF meetings are to some extent those between equals, even though some countries are economically more important than others.)
- Does the purpose of a meeting change the way in which evidence like this can be used?

We can also use this example to raise some general points.

- There is the big issue of correlation and causation here. The fact that seating was arranged 'the Singapore way' and that useful agreement was reached by the IMF is perhaps no more than a positive correlation, with no causal link. It could even be claimed that the seating arrangements were a negative feature: perhaps the quality of the decisions taken were less good than would have happened with a conventional room layout. (Perhaps people felt less comfortable than they would normally be, so agreed to things that they wouldn't normally agree to.)
- We would be interested in additional evidence. This evidence could come from opposite directions. Are there counter-examples in which agreement did not come from meetings conducted in 'the Singapore way'? Are there examples in which, say, IMF meetings reached straightforward agreement in which the members sat behind tables? (Of course, there would have to be lots, otherwise Mme Lagarde wouldn't have made reference to the seating arrangements, if this was the normal way of operating.)

As we can see, claims about evidence need to be considered critically. Does the evidence really have the significance claimed for it?

Finally, of course, there's the so far unasked question.

- Do businesses in Singapore conduct their meetings 'the Singapore way'?

This example of evaluating evidence on 'the Singapore way' of conducting meetings shows the value of using critical thinking in looking at business evidence. You can see that the central thing that you were doing here was to ask the questions 'What might this evidence mean?' or 'What is the possible significance of this evidence?' By taking what someone said it meant (Mme Lagarde), we considered that it might not mean this, that it might mean something else, or that it might not mean anything at all.

You should always ask these central critical thinking questions of meaning and significance when faced with any claims based on evidence.

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