



Perspectives on Thinking and Knowing

These seven perspectives describe how people decide what is true when they make decisions. Read each one and decide which best describes how you decide what is true. Choose only one.

"Observer" – I always use my own direct experience to obtain my best knowledge. When I can see direct evidence, I can trust what is true and solve problems confidently. I usually remain skeptical of anything I did not personally experience. When I have no direct evidence, I am more cautious about deciding to act.

"Truster" – I have confidence in all the knowledge we humans have developed, and I trust that all the remaining mysteries in the world will eventually be fully explained. When I deal with problems and make decisions, I use this knowledge. I trust people in authority when they use these same clear explanations. It is disruptive when people question these basic things that we know are true.

"Feeler" – I see the world as a very uncertain place. I often feel uncertainty about what I can trust to be true. So, beliefs that feel right are the ones I embrace. Until we learn all the answers, I think going with my gut will often be necessary, especially when problems are complicated, or stakes are high. Even experts keep updating and revising what they say.

"Individualist" – I always try to be certain when I make decisions, but I know that I may not know everything. I know that I need to make key decisions when I am still uncertain. Seeking external help isn't useful because everyone's life is different, and my problems are seldom completely clear, or even completely solvable. So, I do my best to decide what is true and then I decide what to do. It's important to me to have reasons for my key decisions, but they are personal to me, and others may not understand how I am deciding what is true and what I need to do to solve my problems.

"Relativist" – I think it is important to realize that facts and truth certainly exist, but that they may apply only in particular contexts. There are no absolutes. What is true in one situation may not be true in another situation. So, people might come up with many different ideas, or take actions that seem odd, but they cannot really be judged by others. I have learned that what is true depends on a person's perspective. I am very reluctant to judge another person's decisions or actions because I may not know their situation.

"Evaluator" – I am certain that some perspectives and actions are better than others, and that it is vitally important for me to identify and act on the ones that are better. Of course, I know that uncertainty is real, and context is important, but I can deal with uncertainty and establish some guidelines and methods. I can use them to guide and evaluate my beliefs about what is true. I do that by comparing evidence, opinions, and arguments across different situations.

"Learner" – I believe that all knowledge contains some elements of uncertainty, and that continued learning is the only way to gain greater understanding. I justify my opinions and test my beliefs by remaining open to new ideas, judging them with appropriate standards. No idea is outside this evaluation process. Sometimes when I learn new information, I realize that some of my beliefs have become uncertain or even obviously false. I follow reasons and evidence wherever they lead me. I consider the opinions and beliefs of others using this same method.

How we see the world determines how we interpret new potential, how we identify problems, judge risk, and decide whether problems have been solved. Once you have identified your perspective, re-read each description, and then pause to consider how each perspective might influence innovative thinking, evaluative thinking, and risk management.



Debrief: Perspectives on Thinking and Knowing

"Observer" – I always use my own direct experience to obtain my best knowledge. When I can see direct evidence, I can trust what is true and solve problems confidently. I usually remain skeptical of anything I did not personally experience. When I have no direct evidence, I am more cautious about deciding to act. **The Observer will find it difficult to discover personally observable evidence in many novel situations and limit their opportunity to assess risks, diminishing their potential for timely decisions.**

"Truster" – I have confidence in all the knowledge we humans have developed, and I trust that all the remaining mysteries in the world will eventually be fully explained. When I deal with problems and make decisions, I use this knowledge. I trust people in authority when they use these same clear explanations. It is disruptive when people question these basic things that we know are true. **The Truster style may be an optimal perspective for those who strive to execute established routines and policies, but this perspective is not optimally useful for evaluating current practices or contributing to new knowledge development.**

"Feeler" – I see the world as a very uncertain place. I often feel uncertainty about what I can trust to be true. So, beliefs that feel right are the ones I embrace. Until we learn all the answers, I think going with my gut will often be necessary, especially when problems are complicated, or stakes are high. Even experts keep updating and revising what they say. **A gut response might be the best response, but without an explanation of why a particular judgement makes our gut feel better we are destined to remain Uncertain Feelers. Leaders and risk managers need that explanation to convince others of the value of their decisions and guide risk management.**

"Individualist" – I always try to be certain when I make decisions, but I know that I may not know everything. I know that I need to make key decisions when I am still uncertain. Seeking external help isn't useful because everyone's life is different, and my problems are seldom completely clear, or even completely solvable. So, I do my best to decide what is true and then I decide what to do. It's important to me to have reasons for my key decisions, but they are personal to me, and others may not understand how I am deciding what is true and what I need to do to solve my problems. **Action is valued, and this is an action focused perspective. The caution is that Individualists can be blind to real and even likely threats. If a judgment is truly the best option, it should always be possible to explain why this is true to the others on the team, even when it may not be possible to disclose all the details to the group.**

"Relativist" – I think it is important to realize that facts and truth certainly exist, but that they may apply only in particular contexts. There are no absolutes, what is true in one situation may not be true in another situation. So, people might come up with many different ideas, or take actions that seem odd, but they cannot really be judged by others. I have learned that what is true depends on a person's perspective. I am very reluctant to judge another person's decisions or actions because I may not know their situation. **A Relativist perspective is often evidence of tolerance for other points of view, facilitating communication. The caution is that failure to evaluate others' perspectives is costly. Taking this stance prevents diligence in controlling risk and assuring goals. . .**

"Evaluator" – I am certain that some perspectives and actions are better than others, and that it is absolutely important for me to identify and act on the ones that are better. Of course, I know that uncertainty is real, and context is important, but I can deal with uncertainty and establish some guidelines and methods. I can use them to guide and evaluate my beliefs about what is true. I do that by comparing evidence, opinions, and arguments across different situations. **The Evaluator is viewed as an asset for risk management in most work settings. The caution for Evaluators is to be on guard for limiting innovation or failing to anticipate changing conditions and new meanings.**

"Learner" – I believe that all knowledge contains some elements of uncertainty, and that continued learning is the only way to gain greater understanding. I justify my opinions and test my beliefs by remaining open to new ideas, judging them with appropriate standards. No idea is outside this evaluation process. Sometimes when I learn new information, I realize that some of my beliefs have become uncertain or even obviously false. I follow reasons and evidence wherever they lead me. I consider the opinions and beliefs of others using this same method. **Learners are typically valued leaders, seen as creative developers and foresightful problem-solvers. The caution for the Learner is to act on evidence of prior errors and make incisive judgments when determining future directions.**



There is no doubt that the perspectives of “Evaluator” and “Learner” are the two most compatible with developing strength in critical thinking skills and mindset.

In creating this Training Tool, we have applied findings from a rich collection of research on human cognitive development. Although there are several useful models describing cognitive development in relationship to how human decide what is true, and apply those ideas to the workplace, the descriptive terms we use here are most closely aligned with a model described by Karen S. Kitchener & Patricia M. King in their studies of reflective judgment over the lifespan.

Most theorists believe that cognitive development transitions over time in each individual, and there is considerable evidence for this belief. In any case, all of these “ways of knowing what is true” (epistemological perspectives) are present in the adult population. Various clusters of these different perspectives are present in most working groups, and these differences often account for failed collaborations and new initiatives.

Completing this training exercise increases awareness of the trainee’s personal perspective on thinking and knowing, as well as informing the trainee of contrasting perspectives that may be relevant to their workgroup’s functioning. The debriefing of the exercise connects each perspective to some of the many ramifications that result from each perspective.