

Lateral thinking

Lateral thinking is a manner of solving problems using an indirect and creative approach via reasoning that is not immediately obvious. It involves ideas that may not be obtainable using only traditional step-by-step logic.^[1]

The term was promulgated in 1967 by Edward de Bono. He cites the Judgment of Solomon as an example, where King Solomon resolves a dispute over the parentage of a child by calling for the child to be cut in half, and making his judgment according to the reactions that this order receives.^[2] Edward de Bono also links lateral thinking with humour, arguing there's a switch-over from a familiar pattern to a new, unexpected one. It is this moment of surprise, generating laughter and new insight, which facilitates the ability to see a different thought pattern which initially was not obvious.^[3]

According to de Bono, lateral thinking deliberately distances itself from the standard perception of creativity as "vertical" logic (the classic method for problem solving).

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Methods

To understand lateral thinking, it is necessary to compare lateral thinking and critical thinking. Critical thinking is primarily concerned with judging the true value of statements and seeking errors. Lateral thinking is more concerned with the "movement value" of statements and ideas. A person uses lateral thinking to move from one known idea to creating new ideas. Edward de Bono defines four types of thinking tools:

1. idea-generating tools intended to break current thinking patterns—routine patterns, the status quo
2. focus tools intended to broaden where to search for new ideas
3. harvest tools intended to ensure more value is received from idea generating output
4. treatment tools that promote consideration of real-world constraints, resources, and support^[4]

Random Entry Idea Generating Tool

The thinker chooses an object at random, or a noun from a dictionary, and associates it with the area they are thinking about. De Bono gives the example the randomly-chosen word "nose" being applied to an office photocopier, leading to the idea that the copier could produce a lavender smell when it was low on paper, to alert staff.^[5]

Provocation Idea Generating Tool

A provocation is a statement that we know is wrong or impossible but is used to create new ideas. De Bono gives an example of considering river pollution and setting up the provocation "the factory is downstream of itself"; this leads to the idea of forcing a factory to take its water input from a point

downstream of its output, an idea which later became law in some countries.^[6] Provocations can be set up by the use of any of the provocation techniques—wishful thinking, exaggeration, reversal, escape, distortion, or arising. The thinker creates a list of provocations and then uses the most outlandish ones to move their thinking forward to new ideas.

Movement Techniques

One can move from a provocation to a new idea by the following methods: extract a principle, focus on the difference, moment to moment, positive aspects, special circumstances.

Challenge Idea Generating Tool

A tool which is designed to ask the question "Why?" in a non-threatening way: why something exists, why it is done the way it is. The result is a very clear understanding of "Why?" which naturally leads to fresh new ideas. The goal is to be able to challenge anything at all, not just items which are problems. For example, one could challenge the handles on coffee cups: The reason for the handle seems to be that the cup is often too hot to hold directly; perhaps coffee cups could be made with insulated finger grips, or there could be separate coffee-cup holders similar to beer holders, or coffee shouldn't be so hot in the first place.

Concept Fan Idea Generating Tool

Ideas carry out concepts. This tool systematically expands the range and number of concepts in order to end up with a very broad range of ideas to consider.

Disproving

Based on the idea that the majority is always wrong (as suggested by Henrik Ibsen^[7] and by John Kenneth Galbraith^[8]), take anything that is obvious and generally accepted as "goes without saying", question it, take an opposite view, and try to convincingly disprove it. This technique is similar to de Bono's "Black Hat" of *Six Thinking Hats*, which looks at identifying reasons to be cautious and conservative.

Problem solving

Problem Solving

When something creates a problem, the performance or the status quo of the situation drops. Problem-solving deals with finding out what caused the problem and then figuring out ways to fix the problem. The objective is to get the situation to where it should be. For example, a production line has an established run rate of 1000 items per hour. Suddenly, the run rate drops to 800 items per hour. Ideas as to why this happened and solutions to repair the production line must be thought of, such as giving the worker a pay raise.

Creative Problem Solving

Using creativity, one must solve a problem in an indirect and unconventional manner. For example, if a production line produced 1000 books per hour, creative problem solving could find ways to produce more books per hour, use the production line, or reduce the cost to run the production line.

Lateral Problem "Solving"

Lateral thinking will often produce solutions whereby the problem appears as "obvious" in hindsight. That lateral thinking will often lead to problems that you never knew you had, or it will solve simple problems that have a huge potential. For example, if a production line produced 1000 books per hour, lateral thinking may suggest that a drop in output to 800 would lead to higher quality, and more motivated workers.

Lateral thinking "puzzles"

These are puzzles that are supposed to demonstrate what lateral thinking is about. However, any puzzle that has only one solution is "not" lateral. While lateral thinking may help you construct such puzzles, the lateral thinking tools will seldom help you solve puzzles.

See also

- [Cognitive Research Trust](#)
- [Derailment \(thought disorder\)](#)
- [Divergent thinking](#)
- [Lateral thinking puzzles](#)
- [Oblique Strategies](#)
- [Provocative operation](#)
- [Parallel thinking](#)
- [Six Thinking Hats](#)
- [Serendipity](#)
- [Thinking outside the box](#)
- [Inductive reasoning](#)
- [Deductive reasoning](#)
- [Creativity](#)
- [Edward de Bono](#)

References

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3. http://informalcoalitions.typepad.com/informal_coalitions/2009/11/the-significance-of-humour-pattern-switching-and-lateral-thinking.html
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5. de Bono, Edward (2015). *Serious Creativity: How to Be Creative Under Pressure and Turn Ideas into Action*. Random House UK. p. 263. ISBN 978-0091939700.
6. De Bono, Edward (1992). *Serious creativity: using the power of lateral thinking to create new ideas* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=NbB9AAAAMAAJ>). HarperBusiness. p. 145. ISBN 9780887305665.
7. In *An Enemy of the People*, 1882.
8. Siracus, Joseph (2012). *Encyclopedia of the Kennedys: The People and Events That Shaped America*. ABC-CLIO. p. 269. ISBN 1598845381.

Further reading

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External links

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