

Developing New Ways of Thinking

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Over the years we tend to develop thinking styles that become ingrained. People who say, "I'm not creative" or "I'm not really a thinker" simply have not been made aware of, or adopted, thinking patterns different from their own. We are all capable of breaking old habits, and this checklist suggests various techniques that can help you to develop new ways of thinking.

What You Need to Know

I just can't come up with good solutions to problems. How can I change this?

You are probably stuck in your habitual mode of thinking. Thinking styles become automatic over the years, and because for the most part they work well for us, we have no incentive to change them. But when your thinking patterns limit your ability to approach problems creatively, it is time to challenge old habits. You might start with some of the techniques outlined in this checklist.

In our meetings we just don't have time to indulge people's creative flights. How can I control coworkers who refuse to focus on the issue at hand?

It's likely that your more imaginative coworkers are simply being themselves. It might be useful to explain the kind of thinking you are looking for and explain why it is more productive in the context of a meeting. Perhaps you can steer them into other settings in which their thinking style will make a real contribution, such as marketing, or research and development.

How can I tap into the creative energy of someone who has great, off-the-wall ideas, but who is very impractical?

Some people have an amazing ability to suppress their logical thinking and let their creativity flow. In order for it to be productive you need to offer them a framework in which to work. Structure need not inhibit them if they are really capable of letting their imagination loose. If you are a logical thinker, you might be the right person to take on the role of guiding their imagination and harnessing their creative energy.

What to Do

Organize and Prioritize

Detailing the various thinking techniques requires far more space than is available here, but it is possible to provide a sampling of the tools available. Thinking techniques can help you:

- organize and prioritize information;
- generate practical outcomes.

If you feel overwhelmed by information, a few simple techniques can help you identify what is important and decide how best to make sense of it.

Understand SWOT Analyses

These are used to identify strengths and weaknesses and to examine existing opportunities and threats. Answering questions in each of these four areas enables you to think systematically about a problem and its potential solutions. For example:

- *Strengths*: What are some benefits of your new product that consumers are demanding? Which features distinguish it from competitors' products?
- *Weaknesses*: Where are the areas of vulnerability or weakness? Is the price a barrier? What could be improved? Would different features improve the product's salability? What are the known vulnerabilities in the market? Is the time of the product's launch crucial to its success?
- *Opportunities*: Where do opportunities exist in terms of technology, markets, policy, and social trends? Do you have a new commercial idea or a new way of doing things? Can you capitalize on your competitors' mistakes?
- *Threats*: What obstacles are in your way? Have you correctly defined your market? What is the current regulatory climate? Are any changes being considered? Are you in a race with your competitors? Might they be winning? Is your financial situation being jeopardized? Should you try to raise money now, or wait for a better time?

Learn About Critical Path Analysis

This is an approach to managing complex projects. It tells you when certain activities need to be completed in order to bring a project in on time and on budget. The idea is to determine which activities are dependent on others being completed first (sequential), and which may be completed

more or less at any time (parallel). The ordering of these activities creates the critical path through the project.

Investigate Mind Maps

Mind maps are graphic representations of whatever is on your mind. They help you get everything on paper without initially having to order or prioritize it. Like road maps, mind maps give you an overview of a large area, enabling you to make the connections that allow you to arrive at your destination.

Start by drawing a circle on a large sheet of paper. In the center of the circle put the word or image that best represents the idea you wish to explore. Then, using free association, place any words and images that come to mind in smaller circles around the hub. Finally, connect the circles with lines, using colors or symbols to highlight similar themes. The finished diagram should reveal unexpected connections between the outer elements and the central idea. Consider how you might use these connections to further your goals.

Be Aware of Force Field Analysis

This is a useful technique for examining the variables in a given situation. Draw three columns; place the issue under consideration in the center column. List the driving forces in one remaining column and the restraining forces in the other, assigning each of these forces a score between one and five representing its relative strength. Then total the scores in these columns. If the driving and restraining totals are equal, the situation is in equilibrium. Once you understand the forces that drive or restrain an issue or decision you will be able to strengthen the drivers, minimize the negatives, and maintain equilibrium as circumstances change.

Think About Decision Trees

Decision trees allow you to make decisions in situations in which you have a great deal of information to sift through. They create a framework in which you can consider alternative solutions and their impact. The decision tree starts on one either edge of a piece of paper, with a symbol representing the decision to be made. Lines representing possible solutions open out like a fan from this nexus. Each line contains its own sequence of decisions and uncertainties, and each of these in turn becomes a new decision point and forms the source of yet another fan of options.

Brainstorm!

Brainstorming is a well-known technique for generating options. All ideas generated in a brainstorming session are welcomed and cannot be censored on the grounds of illogic or impracticability. This “anything goes” approach often motivates people to contribute creative ideas that they might otherwise have censored themselves and withheld. Free association, obscure and esoteric ideas are to be strongly encouraged. Only after all the ideas have been collected are they reviewed and prioritized.

Develop Lateral Thinking Techniques

Lateral thinking is an unorthodox approach to problem solving. It is concerned with moving sideways instead of head-on, fostering different perspectives, concepts, and approaches to resolution. It is usually done in a team setting, in which participants are provoked to abandon their preconceptions and usual line of thought. It cuts across patterns and the status quo, and jump-starts ideas in new territory where they may flourish unexpectedly.

Learn About the Six Thinking Hats

Six thinking hats is a powerful technique developed by Edward de Bono for looking at decisions from multiple perspectives. Each person—alone or in a group—wears a series of imaginary hats, each representing a different outlook and symbolized by a different color. This technique forces people to move from one mode of thinking to another. White hats focus on the data, look for gaps, extrapolate from history, and examine future trends. Red hats use intuition and emotion to look at problems. Black hats look at the negative aspects, finding the reasons why something may not work. If an idea can get beyond the black hats, it is more likely to succeed. Yellow hats think positively. The optimistic view from this perspective clarifies the benefits of a decision, providing a boost to the thinking process. Green hats develop creative, freewheeling solutions from a strictly positive perspective, allowing no room for criticism. Blue hats orchestrate the meeting—you are in control in this hat. To keep ideas flowing you can direct everyone to change hats.

Know the Value of *Questioning*

In *questioning*, you ask why a problem is occurring, and then ask again—four more times: *Why? Why? Why? Why?* This allows you to drill down to the heart of the matter. Or ask the six universal questions to explore the full extent of a problem: *What? Where? When? How? Why? Who?*

What to Avoid

You Believe That Everyone Thinks the Same Way As You

Productive groups encourage their members to contribute in a variety of ways. If you look at the people around you at work, you will probably recognize different thinking styles and recall how each of them has contributed to better clarity, decisions, and outcomes.

You Criticize Others' Creativity

When you are under pressure, you may be tempted to think: The last thing I need is flaky ideas when I've got a deadline! But when you have not been under stress, you have undoubtedly seen the real value that creativity can bring. Try not to stifle creative thought; instead, guide and control it openly, alternately encouraging and focusing it as needed.

You Underestimate the Importance of Structure

Entrepreneurial businesses are often formed by people with extraordinarily creative minds. Eventually, all businesses need structure; good decision making and effective management require systems and focused thinking. For a business to grow, creative thinkers need to learn to accommodate practical, analytical thinkers.

Where to Learn More

Books:

Buzan, Tony. *The Mind Map Book: How to Use Radiant Thinking to Maximize Your Brain's Untapped Potential*. New York: Plume, 1996.

Buzan, Tony. *Use Both Sides of Your Brain*. 3rd ed. New York: Plume, 1991.

de Bono, Edward. *Lateral Thinking: Creativity Step by Step*. New York: HarperCollins, 1990.

de Bono, Edward. *Six Thinking Hats*. Rev. ed. New York: Little, Brown, 1999.

Sternberg, Robert J. *Thinking Styles*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Web Sites:

Buzan Centers: www.buzancentres.com

Buzan World: www.buzanworld.com

Creative and lateral thinking techniques:
www.brainstorming.co.uk/tutorials/creativethinkingcontents.html

Edward de Bono's Web site: www.edwdebono.com

Innovative thinking resources for entrepreneurs: www.innovationtools.com

The Open Directory Project: http://dmoz.org/Science/Social_Sciences/Psychology/Creativity