

Taking Different Approaches to a Problem

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We are under such time pressures at work that we tend to solve problems based on what has worked in the past. This approach precludes us from finding new and effective solutions. Instead, we look for “quick fixes.”

Considering a problem from different perspectives helps us solve it creatively and permanently—and may even save time and increase productivity.

What You Need to Know

From which different perspectives should I consider a problem? If a solution is found, I should stop there, right?

If you only consider problems from one perspective, you may be overlooking relevant information that can affect the solution. Think about the context surrounding the problem. Is there anything else that is affected by or could affect the problem? If you look beyond the isolated incident, you may find a more effective solution. For example, if a policeman who pulls someone over for speeding and cannot look at the situation from more than one viewpoint, he or she may focus on the driver while the passenger may be suffering a heart attack or about to have a baby!

I am too busy to start considering different ways to complete my tasks. Can I change the way I look at problems without spending too much time?

By being aware that there are other ways to look at problems, you can consider the issue from a wider viewpoint. These are some possible questions to ask yourself:

- Do I have all the information?
- Are there extenuating circumstances?
- Is my approach possibly flawed?
- Is the problem I am faced with repetitive and my solution short-term?

All of these considerations will lead to a fast appraisal and will focus your efforts more effectively.

I am so used to considering problems from my own perspective that I don't know how to change my approach. How can I achieve this?

Very often, familiarity with a situation causes predictable and repetitive responses. It is sometimes a good idea to have an inexperienced person look at the problem. As a result of being too familiarized with the problem, you may have missed the obvious questions that lead to creative solutions. You may ask someone who has not been exposed to your problem to give you their gut impressions.

How can I assimilate all the information I gather, and determine the best solution?

It is important to frame your thinking around the context of the issue you facing. To sort out the relevant from the irrelevant, look toward the future to anticipate the outcome of your potential actions. If a longer-term solution can be found by adopting a different perspective, then it is probably a good one to implement.

What to Do

Know the Importance of Different Viewpoints

The anthropologist Ralph Linton stated that "the last thing a fish would notice would be the water." We become so familiarized with our own worlds that we stop noticing their defining features.

In restricting ourselves to one perspective, we fail to notice other views, and thus end up living in a monochrome world. Aside from being less exciting and enjoyable, a single perspective precludes myriad possibilities and prevents us from finding new ways of doing things.

In order to enhance our resourcefulness and add more value to our work, we need to see the world through different eyes. As a result of the new insights and inspiration to be gained from this practice, we will be in a better position to take innovative actions. In addition, we will learn new things and revive our work experience.

Be Familiar with the Various Strategies

Six Thinking Hats

There are several strategies that help people consider problems from different perspectives. One of the best-known is Edward de Bono's *Six Thinking Hats*. This approach is supposed to disrupt our tendency to consider problems in a logical, deductive way, by enabling people to look beyond the limits of a problem.

The *Six Thinking Hats* is a useful tool for thinking around a problem. It may be used in meetings where each participant "wears" a different colored "hat." Each hat should trigger different thinking processes.

- **White Hat:** the "data hat." The person wearing this hat should focus on the available information and identify gaps. He or she should also consider a situation's patterns and trends and construct a future picture from this analysis.
- **Red:** the "intuitive hat." The person wearing this hat should introduce feelings, both while reaching a decision and in predicting others' reactions to it.
- **Black:** the "opposing hat." The person wearing this hat critically examines the decision and identifies errors in the thinking process. This reveals a plan's weak points and helps in devising contingencies.
- **Yellow:** the "positive hat." The person wearing this hat encourages an optimistic outlook—one that focuses on a decision's possibilities and benefits. He or she is supposed to restore the meeting's energy.
- **Green:** the "creative hat," which allows for the introduction of innovative ideas and alternative solutions. The wearer should be open-minded and encourage innovative thinking.
- **Blue:** the chairperson's hat, who directs the meeting while making sure that hats are being worn at the right times. If the process is stalling, the Blue Hat person is supposed to intervene and redirect the discussion.

Reframing Matrix

Michael Morgan's *Reframing Matrix* provides another technique for adopting different perspectives.

In a reframing matrix, a question is written in a piece of paper, with boxes are drawn around it. Each box is employed to look at the problem from a novel perspective. For example, under the *4Ps* approach, one would consider the problem from the perspectives of the Product itself, the Planning implications, the Potential of the product and the People involved. In the alternative, the boxes may be used to consider the problem from different professional stakeholders' perspective (these can be employees, customers, suppliers or partners).

Concept Fan

Similarly to the Reframing Matrix, Edward de Bono's *Concept Fan* expands the range of solutions once the obvious avenues have been exploited. This strategy removes someone from the situation to newly consider the problem from a wider perspective. A Concept Fan is created by drawing a circle on the left of the page and writing the problem within it. Then draw lines emanating from the circle towards the right of the page, leading to various potential solutions. In the end, you can assess each of the solutions while not neglecting their context. The drawing of the fan makes patterns and links apparent, thus revealing a unique and more efficient solution with a longer-term impact on the problem.

Random Input

When you feel like you have reached an impasse on a particular issue, you can employ *Random Input* to generate lateral thinking. This technique relies on the connections that our brains make and the experiences that they trigger. To employ this technique, pick a random (tangible) noun from the dictionary to use as the basis of your brainstorming activity. You will find that despite which noun you pick, you will link it back to your problem in some way. It doesn't matter whether it is outlandish or realistic because this exercise's main purpose is to expand your thinking possibilities—in the end, the unthinkable may turn out to be viable. This technique will force you to be creative by eliciting many potential solutions.

Provocation

Like Random Input, *Provocation* challenges your normal thought patterns. With this technique, "senseless" statements are used, which contradict what we "know" as true. If we treat the contradictory statement as true, we generate a range of inventive suggestions which make it true in the end. We then frame the exercise in the present by asking questions, such as "Would there be any consequences and benefits if such a statement were true?" and "What are the requisite conditions for the solution to work and what would bring that solution to life?". If this does lead to inventive solutions, it can nevertheless be useful in that it stimulates the brain and encourages creative expression. Such brainstorming techniques encourage more creative, out-of-the-box thinking.

Promote Diversity

You should strive for having as many people from different cultures, professional backgrounds, and interests as possible in meetings that require different viewpoints. Diverse teams come up with new ways of tackling issues. People from different backgrounds, talents, and passions are the perfect antidote to long-lived assumptions. These assumptions will likely go against someone's sensitivities, thus leading to a reconsideration of the issue. Homogeneous teams very often reach the same results without any discussions. These decisions lack creativity and thwart innovation and discovery.

Just as the Nobelist Albert Szent-Gyorgi has stated, “Discovery consists in seeing what everyone else has seen and thinking what no-one else has thought.”

What to Avoid

You Make Assumptions

If you tend to assume that others share your attitudes, values, and beliefs, it may come as a shock to realize that this is not the case. Indeed, if you make this assumption you risk being seen as egocentric; and may even insult coworkers. When under pressure to make a decision, your assumptions will also come under attack—especially if your team is vocal and diverse. You should therefore be aware of differences and ensure that your coworkers either a) share your views or b) are part of a supportive “loyal minority.”

You Stereotype People

Stereotyping strips people of their individuality and can result in decisions that fail to accommodate everyone’s needs or perspectives. We tend to stereotype people to avoid the time and energy required for knowing them. These stereotypes function as “codes” which enable us to categorize people, and thus not treat them as individuals. Although this tendency may lead to quicker decisions, it is essentially lazy. Therefore, when making a decision, check that your assumptions are shared (or at least understood) by your colleagues so that you avoid cultural misunderstandings!

We may think we know someone based on a past observation or shared experience. However, we don’t know what the person’s perspective is in the given situation. Without this, we can miscalculate their motivations or intentions. If you hold a perception which will influence a decision that affects someone, seek his or her confirmation before it is too late to modify or reverse your decision.

You Underestimate the Importance of Diversity

We tend to look for similarities to establish connections with people, but this human tendency thwarts a group’s creative potential. Appreciate the attributes that diverse teams contribute to a decision by celebrating creative solutions.

Where to Learn More

Books:

Bevan, Rob, and Tim Wright, *Unleash Your Creativity: Secrets of Creative Genius*. Perigee Trade, 2007.

de Bono, Edward, *Six Thinking Hats*. Back Bay Books, 1999.

de Bono, Edward, *Serious Creativity: Using the Power of Lateral Thinking to Create New Ideas: A Step-by-step Approach to Creativity on Demand*. HarperBusiness, 1993.

Michalko, Michael, *Cracking Creativity: The Secrets of Creative Genius for Business and Beyond*. Ten Speed Press, 2001.

Nalebuff, Barry, and Ian Ayres, *Why Not?: How to Use Everyday Ingenuity to Solve Problems Big And Small*. Harvard Business School Press, 2006.

Robinson, Ken, *Out of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative*. Capstone, 1999.

Web Sites:

Mind Tools: www.mindtools.com

The Mind Gym: www.themindgym.com