Edward de Bono’s Lateral Thinking

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Abstract

Edward de Bono is often considered the godfather of creative thinking. (Lewis, 2005, p.3) Perhaps his greatest contribution to creative studies is the concept of lateral thinking, which aids in the processes of creative thinking and problem solving. The lateral thinking model can be utilized by all people, in all industries. De Bono has outlined several methods and techniques such as po, the six thinking hats, and the creative pause, to best assist in the use of lateral thinking.
Born from an interest in creative and perceptual thinking, Edward de Bono originally developed a concept he referred to as “the other sort of thinking.” (de Bono, 1992, p. 52) This notion was created after bringing together three main strands of de Bono’s prior curiosities and research: thinking, perceptual thinking and self-organizing systems. At this point there was a need to describe a thought process that dealt with changing perceptions and concepts. (de Bono, 1994, p. 53) While this process is a method of creativity, defining it as such under the broad and vague use of this word misses the point that it is a deliberate and formal process. (de Bono, 1994, p. 53) Then finally, while being interviewed in 1967 by London Life Magazine, Edward de Bono described this process as a need to move “laterally” when seeking other approaches and alternatives. At last the proper, and now common, phrase of “lateral thinking” was coined. (de Bono, 1992, p. 52) Today, lateral thinking is defined in the Canadian Oxford Dictionary as “a method of solving problems indirectly or by apparently illogical methods.”

What typically matters most in vertical thinking is rightness, and a directional move that is ever forward and upward in the creation of new and better ideas. With lateral thinking the movement can be “sideways,” allowing for exploration and trials of different perceptions and concepts. (de Bono, 1992, p. 53) Vertical thinking methods only allow for movement when there is a direction to move, while lateral thinking moves in search of a new direction, which allows for the generation of new ideas. Vertical thinking will always follow the most likely paths to attain a solution, while lateral thinking explores the least likely paths. (de Bono, 1970, p. 39) These are just some of the many distinctions between vertical and lateral thinking that can be drawn.
In 1970 de Bono drew further comparisons between vertical and lateral thinking. With vertical thinking one uses negativity to avoid and block off certain paths, but lateral thinking sees no negative. It is understood that when using lateral thinking there are times when the wrong path will lead to the right end. (de Bono, 1970, p. 42) Vertical thinking is selective, while lateral thinking is generative. Simply stated, rightness is what matters in vertical thinking; richness is most important to lateral thinking, with the understanding that this richness seeks to open up other pathways. (de Bono, 1970, p. 39) It is also important to note that while these two theories are often viewed as complete opposites, there are times when lateral thinking must draw on some of the stringent processes utilized by vertical thinking to work efficiently. Vertical thinking is analytical while lateral thinking is provocative; using information not for its own sake but provocatively in order to bring about repatterning. However, the provocative qualities of lateral thinking are only productive when followed by the use of vertical thinking’s selective qualities. (de Bono, 1970, p. 40)

While there are many differences between vertical and lateral thinking, they should not be viewed as antagonistic, but rather complementary. The process of lateral thinking was developed in order to better generate new ideas and approaches, and to seek new solutions. Once these ideas are created, vertical thinking should be utilized to develop them. Thus, lateral thinking can enhance vertical thinking by offering more options to choose from, and vertical thinking multiplies lateral thinking’s effectiveness by putting the ideas generated to good use. (de Bono, 1970, p. 50)

Lateral thinking is concerned with changing patterns. Rather than taking a pattern and further developing it, as is done in vertical thinking, lateral thinking seeks to
restructure a pattern by putting things together in a different way. (de Bono, 1970, p. 40)

Patterns are typically important to help us make sense of the world and to live effectively. (de Bono, 1994, p. 53) Patterns create order and routine. However, when it comes to the creation of new ideas, working within existing patterns will not lead to new ones. The technical description of lateral thinking is based on a consideration of a self-organizing pattern-making information system: “cutting across patterns in a self-organizing information system.” (de Bono, 1992, p. 53) This creates lateral movements through the thinking process, and builds an asymmetric patterning system. These new patterns are crucial for generating new ideas.

Two important idioms of lateral thinking are judgment and movement. Without judgment we cannot get by in this world. It allows us to recognize patterns, and derivations from patterns. (de Bono, 1994, p. 61) The idiom of movement allows for moving across channels. The deliberate process of movement seeks to bring about movement from one idea to another. (de Bono, 1996, p. 42) We use judgment to stay within existing channels, and we use movement when we want to change patterns. (de Bono, 1990, p. 227)

Creating new arrangements of information, repatterning, is an important aspect of lateral thinking. The word “po” is derived from such words as hypothesis, suppose and possible (all include “po” within their structure), and was invented by de Bono to describe the “forward use” of an idea. (de Bono, 1994, p. 62) The word po is meant to be directly and deliberately provocative. Po can be simply remembered as standing for “provocative operation.” (de Bono, 1994, p. 63) The first function of po is the arrangement of information to create new patterns, and to restructure old ones. The
concept is provocative and permissive, putting information together in new ways, and allowing unjustified arrangements of information. Po is also liberating, as it disrupts old patterns in order to put imprisoned information together in a new way. (de Bono, 1990, p. 227) The second function of po is to challenge existing patterns. This can be done by challenging the arrogance of established patterns, questioning their validity and by rescuing information that has been trapped in existing labels and classifications. (de Bono, 1990, p. 236)

Rather than searching for truths and “what is” in vertical thinking, lateral thinking is more concerned with possibilities and what might be. There are two senses in which the term lateral thinking is used. The first is specific, which sets forth a set of systematic techniques used for changing conceptions and perceptions to generate new ones. The second is general, allowing for the exploration of multiple possibilities and approaches, rather than just searching for one. (de Bono, 1992, p. 55)

One of the most commonly used methods of lateral thinking is referred to as the six thinking hats. The six thinking hats approach allows an individual, or group, to safely and effectively explore all aspects of the creation, and completion of ideas. The first of the six hats is the white hat. The white hat puts a focus on information and facts, briefly putting aside proposals and arguments. Warmth is attributed to the red hat. This hat gives permission to put forth feelings, emotions and intuitions without justification. The black hat is often seen as the “caution” hat, and is the most used, and useful hat. This hat prevents disastrous mistakes by giving thought to legalities and logistics. While invaluable, it is important not to allow early negativity to kill creativity. Next, the yellow hat pushes for optimism and a logical, positive view of things. This hat allows a search
for the benefits of an idea and discussion of feasibility. Green is the creative hat, searching for additional alternatives and putting forth possibilities and hypotheses. Lastly, the blue hat is used for process-control, this keeps the process organized and productive. (de Bono, 1992, pp. 77-81)

The six thinking hats method has had several successes with major companies because it is practical, and makes a notable difference. One of the best examples is that of a Japanese corporation known as Nippon Telephone and Telegraph (NTT). Mr. Hisashi Shinto was the chief executive of NTT, and had been named the Japanese businessman of the year for a huge feat in privatizing a giant organization. In charge of 350,000 employees, Shinto asked his executives to read a book on the six thinking hats. He reported that just six months after this request he noticed a powerful effect, stating that not only was his team more creative, but also more constructive. IBM reported similar findings in 1990 when they implemented the six hats method into yearly training for their 40,000 managers worldwide. (de Bono, 1992, p. 77)

Beyond the six thinking hats there are other techniques to assist the creative thinking process. The brain works to make life easy by creating routines; unless there is some obstacle, thinking and action will flow along smoothly. (de Bono, 1992, p. 86) To break away from these routines and establish creative attitudes in a reliable manner, the “creative pause” is often used. This is one of the simplest of all creative techniques, but it can be the most powerful. The idea is to take the time to pause, not necessarily because there is a problem or some other sort of hold up, but solely because you want to. The creative pause is an intentional interruption to the smooth flow of ideas. (de Bono, 1992, p. 87) There are times in many thinking processes, including the six thinking hats and
lateral thinking, that the thinker may sense a possible value or opportunity on the horizon, or conversely feel that something is being done in a very complicated way. These situations create a platform for the legitimate use of the creative pause. This pause allows for a thoughtful moment to carefully sort through some ideas, or avoid meandering too far down the wrong path. Sometimes the mere interruption of the flow of thought can open up new lines of thought. The creative pause does not require the use of any systematic tools of lateral thinking. While very simple, the creative pause requires a lot of discipline in order to halt the smooth flow of ideas. (de Bono, 1992, p. 87)

Many creative people instinctively use and apply some of the attitudes and processes of lateral thinking. They instinctively understand the “escape” value of getting a different perspective or taking a moment to step back and look at things from a distance. (de Bono, 1984, p. 119) The creativity of escape simply means escaping from the usual way of doing or looking at things. Lateral thinking is an idea generating thinking process that allows for new and different ways of doing things. This thinking process can be used for a variety of needs: problem solving, processing perceptual choice, periodic reassessment and the prevention of sharp divisions and polarizations. The use of lateral thinking in a multitude of platforms, through a variety of methods, brings about new and innovative ideas and solutions in a way that any individual, creative or not, can utilize and attain.
Appendix

