

Lateral thinking exercise 1

Lateral thinking is a means of escape from existing ideas and perceptions in order to find better ones, ie a means of switching from one pattern of thinking to another. It is also an attitude – a willingness to try to look at things in different ways. There are methods/techniques that we can use to aid and improve our lateral thinking.

Lateral thinking is important because according to de Bono the mind is a self-organizing system that seeks to fit new information into **existing** patterns. As such, it is designed to be uncreative. The way that humour works illustrates this.

Central to de Bono's techniques for lateral thinking is provocation. The word *po* has been introduced by de Bono to signal that we are offering a provocation. Po may be thought of as an abbreviation of provocation operation but de Bono has said it is derived from *hypothesis*, *suppose*, *possibility* and *poetry*. Five ways to generate a provocation are:

- escape by removing a feature of the situation/object/institution/concept or whatever is the focus of our thinking;
- reverse some direction in the situation/object/institution/concept or whatever is the focus of our thinking;
- make an outrageous/absurd suggestion;
- wishful thinking
- introduce a random word.

Po is just the start of the process though. It is important that we get movement from our provocation – movement across channels, to another pattern. There are a number of ways we can attempt to get movement:

- extract a principle from the provocation;
- focus on what's different from the usual in the provocation;
- search for value in the provocation;
- ask ourselves "what's interesting?"
- think through the moment to moment consequences of the provocation.

Try the following exercises.

1. Which of the following statements might be used as effective provocations?
 - a. Aeroplanes should land upside down.
 - b. Hamburgers could be square

- c. Five hours sleep is enough
 - d. There should be more female MPs
 - e. People should pay taxes according to their weight
2. Set up an escape-type provocation for each of the following. (You pick out a feature you take for granted and then cancel or drop this feature.)
 - a. Fire service
 - b. Library
 - c. University
 - d. Tennis
 - e. Mobile phones
3. Set up a reversal-type provocation for each of the following. (You take the normal direction of action and reverse it.)
 - a. Collecting money for charity
 - b. Watching television
 - c. Choosing a career
 - d. Teaching
 - e. Valentines day
4. Here is a provocation. Po everyone celebrates two birthdays a year: their real birthday and an official birthday on a date of their choosing.
 - a. Use the search for value method for getting movement from the provocation.
 - b. Use the extract a principle method for getting movement from the provocation.
5. Here is a provocation. Po each person decides how long he or she wants to work each day.
 - a. Use the moment to moment method to get movement from the provocation.
 - b. Use the search for value method of getting movement from the provocation.
6. Here is a provocation. Po instead of tidying their own desk at the end of each day, each worker is responsible for tidying another worker's desk.
 - a. Use the focus on difference method of getting movement from the provocation.
7. You are involved in a campaign to encourage people to take more exercise. You need ideas. Set up a provocation using one of the three methods: reversal, escape, wishful thinking. Then use the extract a principle method to get movement from the provocation.

Most of the exercises on this sheet are adapted from de Bono (1992).

Reference: de Bono, E (1992) *Teach Your Child to Think*; Viking