

Think laterally for success

In an increasingly competitive and internationally-centric business environment, Robert Rawlinson urges managers to utilise creative thinking in order to gain the upper hand.



'Ideas are the currency of success. They separate you from your competition'

Dr Edward de Bono



About The Edward de Bono Foundation UK

Robert Rawlinson is CEO of the Edward de Bono Foundation (UK), which helps organisations increase constructive and creative thinking to improve performance and productivity. The Edward de Bono Foundation UK is a registered charity, formed in 2007, to develop and drive the take up of Edward de Bono's *Thinking Systems*, including *Six Thinking Hats*, *Simplicity*, *Lateral Thinking* and *DATT (Direct Attention Thinking Tools)*.

The Foundation is based at the Manchester Business Park near Manchester Airport and has ambitions to take de Bono Thinking Systems into the UK education system and more widely in industry and government. Robert Rawlinson is confident that de Bono Thinking Systems can make a difference to innovation, creativity and productivity in the UK.

He says, "There is no doubt we are all working longer and harder than ever before, but it does not mean we are always working productively. I've seen, first hand, the astonishing difference simple techniques, such as de Bono's *Six Thinking Hats*, can have on a company in a couple of hours. It is time for methods like these to revolutionise Britain."

For more information, please visit <http://www.edwarddebonofoundation.co.uk>

You sometimes read about creative accounting, but it's rare that the term is applied to the functions of administration and management. People often apply the term 'creative thinking' to more arts-based occupations, but this is a misconception.

If you met two people on a bus, one casually dressed, holding a guitar on his lap, the other in a pinstripe suit, you might assume that the guitar player is 'more creative' – but is this right? Naturally, perceptions and stereotypes exist because it is a human trait to pigeon hole people, but creativity comes in many forms and should not be thought of as a mysterious art.

Firstly, before you can think about becoming more creative, it is important to understand what true creativity is and why it is missing in Western thinking.

A history of logical thinking

During the Renaissance, when Greek thinking infiltrated Europe through the influence of the Arabs in Spain, schools, universities and 'thinking' in general were in the hands of Church people. They did not subscribe to thinking that was perceptual, or creative, or even constructive. What they did need was truth, logic and argument to disprove heretics. So critical thinking became the core thinking. It was left for invention and design to be practised by individuals, and their evolution has, as a result, been very slow.

To this day, education systems still believe that critical thinking is enough. It is of course essential – just as the rear left wheel of a car is essential – but it is not enough. Progress needs the ability to design the way forward. The prevention of errors is not sufficient. The brakes of a car are at their most effective only when a car is rolling downhill.

Creativity means designing the way forward. Creativity is needed for change, improvement and ideas. Without creativity there is only repetition and routine.

Lateral Thinking

All businesses and public sector organisations are under pressure to find new and better ways to increase overall performance. Whether this involves cutting costs, meeting targets or developing a new product or service, fresh ideas are in constant demand to remedy a problem or to simplify a process.

As we enter the next phase of the information age, knowledge and its creative application will provide the key differentiator in business and management – from the way we educate our children to how we equip our staff with the skills to power the economy.

Dr Edward de Bono, the world's authority on creative thinking, states, "The quality of your thinking will determine the quality of your future." So, how do you get staff to embrace creativity in their everyday lives and will it help?

Creativity is not just about being a great artist or being able to play a musical instrument; it's also about taking an alternative approach to solving a problem. In the 1970s, Dr de Bono changed the world's approach to creativity when he coined the term *Lateral Thinking*.

When looking to get a better understanding of the brain, Dr de Bono's research led to the discovery that the brain is a self-organising system that routinely interprets inputs into patterns. The brain is not inherently designed to be creative. However, through the adoption of Lateral Thinking tools, it can be trained to move laterally across patterns, opening up new perceptions, concepts and ideas.

Dr de Bono has created formal techniques to break out from previously established thinking patterns to foster Lateral Thinking. He proposes that, "the most effective way of changing ideas is not from outside, by conflict, but from within by the insight rearrangement of available information."

In the working world, we can learn a lot about creativity from humour. Comedians make us laugh by surprising us with a switch in perception. A funny joke is usually obvious in hindsight, but we need a bridge to help us get there. With Lateral Thinking, however, there is no storyteller to make the jump for us. So we have to devise a practical means for cutting across the tracks. We can do this by using a combination of provocation and movement.

70% of the public believe innovation is the best way to solve economic and social problems; yet only 40 % say the UK has an environment where innovation can flourish.

Mori poll for NESTA, October 2006

Provocation equals Integration

De Bono invented the word "PO" which stands for a Provocation Operation. He says, "It signals that what follows is to be used directly as a provocation (that is to say, used for its movement value). A PO provides some sort of value that has been provided historically by accident, mistake, eccentricity, or individual bold-mindedness. The PO (provocation) serves to take us out of the comfort of an existing pattern."

An excellent example of PO in action is famously 3M's sticky Post-it Notes. A company world-renowned for adhesives embarked on some lateral thinking and thought; "We're a company known for sticking things, why don't we challenge that idea and make something that doesn't stick?" And the idea behind the Post-it Note was born.

There are a number of approaches to PO, which are part of de Bono's Thinking Systems that help to encourage Lateral Thinking – for example, escape, reversal, exaggeration, distortion, and wishful thinking. Using these methods, the lateral thinker is able to provoke their own thinking.

Whatever business you are in, Lateral Thinking is an essential means of fostering creativity. Unfortunately it doesn't happen overnight; like any skill it needs teaching and practising. At the Edward de Bono Foundation, we teach Lateral Thinking tools, such as Alternative or Concept Triangles, Focus, Challenge and Random Word Entry to give business people the tools to break out from their regular – vertical – thinking methods.

As small and medium sized businesses are faced with the many challenges ahead, from home and abroad, this alternative approach *will* just make the difference