Dr Edward de Bono, a leading authority in the field of creative thinking and direct teaching of thinking as a skill, is considered one of the most influential business thinkers and visionaries in the world. He lectures worldwide and has had faculty appointments at the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, London and Harvard. His teaching in thinking has been sought by governments, global organizations, and leading international corporations including Microsoft, IBM, DuPont, Prudential, Ford, GM, Motorola, Ericsson, Citicorp, Bank of America, Siemens, Nokia, TATA, Shell and Exxon.

In addition to his business consulting in thinking skills, Edward de Bono works widely in education and his thinking methods are now mandatory in schools in a number of countries.

Dr de Bono has written over 70 books which have been translated into 39 languages. His most recent book is How to Have Creative Ideas - 62 Exercises to Develop the Mind (Vermilion, 2007).

Guru Interview: Dr Edward de Bono

In this interview Edward de Bono discusses the development, application and impact of his ideas about thinking and creativity.

Interview by Sarah Powell
Over the past 38 years you have written over 70 books focusing on the development of thinking, and notably lateral thinking which you describe as “the process of using information to bring about creativity and insight restructuring”. What inspired this work and how has your scientific background contributed to the development of your ideas and techniques?

Edward de Bono:

My scientific background was essential to the development of my ideas. My background is in medicine as well as in psychology, and it was through medicine when I was dealing with the complicated system of glands, kidneys, circulation, respiration and so forth that I derived the principles of self-organizing biological systems. I then applied these concepts to the neural networks in the brain and determined that this was how the brain works. This was the inspiration for my key book The Mechanism of Mind.

Professor Murray Gell-Mann, who was awarded a Nobel Prize for his discovery of the quark, subsequently commissioned computer experts to simulate its theories and concluded that they worked exactly as I had predicted. For the first time in human history we could relate thinking and thinking methods to the way the brain works. This book formed the basis for the design of specific tools for lateral thinking, which is formal and deliberate creativity.

As you have developed your thinking ideas, tools and scenarios, have you revised any of your early conclusions?

Edward de Bono:

The answer is no. I would equate the development of my thinking to entering a new universe, or a new country. You look around you, there’s a lot to see, but the basic things don’t change. You could compare it to the Euclidean geometry which we use today, and which was designed more than 2,000 years ago. Fundamentals don’t change.

Your concepts of perceptual, parallel and lateral thinking have had wide-ranging applications ranging from early years education and the training of young offenders to business and management, and major international events and disaster organization. What do you consider your most interesting or rewarding challenge to date?

Edward de Bono:

The applications certainly have been wide. In China five provinces are currently conducting a pilot project of our work in schools. If they are pleased with the results, the work will be introduced into four million schools in China. At the same time, India has asked me to provide training in 55,000 schools and in certain provinces my training is now mandatory by law. In Venezuela every child has to learn my thinking techniques at school. The same goes for the Dominican Republic and a number of other countries.

In terms of challenges, these are more related to getting particular thinking work incorporated in education and this could be seen more as a political than an intellectual challenge. But this is what I regard as the biggest challenge because youngsters really benefit hugely from learning thinking. In Britain some research with the government’s New Deal programme found that when unemployed young people were taught thinking for just five hours, their employment rate increased fivefold. When violent youngsters at Hungerford Guidance Centre were taught thinking, the level of criminal conviction dropped to less than 10 per cent of what it had been. So this is the challenge – to get things which we know and have shown to work better known and better used.

Your thinking methods promote behavioural change and there have been some remarkable recorded impacts on time management, conflict resolution, bottom-line performance and creativity in many different environments. Techniques such as Six Hats thinking appear deceptively simple yet require the discipline of constant practice to promote systematic thinking. How is ongoing progress monitored and performance evaluated?

Edward de Bono:

There are thousands of schools and organizations using my techniques and it would be impossible to monitor all these programmes. However, we do receive feedback both from many of the organizations themselves, and from formal research in schools.

A company in Finland reported that, as a result of using Six Hats training, time spent in multinational project discussions was cut from what used to be thirty days to just two. At the time of the tsunami in Sri Lanka, when aid agencies failed to agree between themselves a common approach, the government invited my trainers to Singapore and, following Six Hats training, they were able to draw up a plan of action in just two days. The Sri Lankan government has now stipulated that all aid agencies must learn this method. Formal research in schools in the UK conducted for the Atkey Organization showed that teaching thinking specifically as a subject increased performance in every other subject by between 30 and 100 per cent.
While you have won plaudits for your work from many eminent people and organizations, in the UK praise has sometimes been more muted and your ideas have attracted some criticism. Can you suggest why, and do cultural differences play a role?

Edward de Bono:

Well, I would have to say that there are two words to explain that: jealousy and stupidity. Unfortunately stupidity is the dominant one. Some people simply don’t understand my work. They haven’t read the books. They haven’t been to a seminar. Meanwhile top mathematicians, physicists, Nobel Prize winners, not only accept it, they like it.

What is needed is an attitude of open-mindedness. Some time ago the coach of the Australian cricket team, John Buchanan, invited me to give a lateral thinking seminar to his team and his management. Since then they have been winning. Now I'm not suggesting that my seminar made them so powerful, but their attitude of saying: “maybe there’s something we can learn?” must help. The same thing occurred in Australian-rules football. The West Coast Eagles asked me to give them a training session last year, following which they won the championship for the first time in many, many years. Again there is that attitude that they should listen; that they might learn something; that there might be something to explore - and that is important.

“The adversarial approach to discussion or negotiation, the idea that you focus your whole intelligence in trying to prove the other fellow wrong, is just stupid.”

I see “knocking copy” as an inability to write constructively. I haven’t encountered such resistance to or rejection of my ideas anywhere other than in the UK and I’ve worked in Japan, Korea, China, India, South America, North America, Canada. . . In Europe, Spain is the country which has taken up my work most enthusiastically – and this is reflected in Spanish-speaking countries in South America. Elsewhere in Europe, there has been notable interest in Italy and in Russia.

You have also asked about potential problems coming from differences in language, culture and so on. The reality is the very opposite of what you might think. Take parallel or Six Hats thinking, for instance. This is very widely used in China and Japan and many other countries where western argument is totally unacceptable. In other words, my work is more easily accepted in some of these countries than are other forms of thinking because these cultures tend not to have arguments – they think it is extremely rude to disagree and attack people and so on. This means that my programmes actually cut across cultures far more than other methods of thinking do. Indeed my first book, The Use of Lateral Thinking, may be “new think” in Japan where it sold more copies per head than Love Story did in America.

The adversarial approach to discussion or negotiation, the idea that you focus your whole intelligence in trying to prove the other fellow wrong, is just stupid. Let me give you a very interesting example. In the USA one of my colleagues has been doing research with juries in courts. Using Six Hat parallel thinking with juries, they have been able to reach a unanimous decision very quickly. Judges in Michigan and Wisconsin were so impressed that they’ve retained the right to recommend that a jury be trained in Six Hat thinking.

Are your programmes easier to implement in a teamworking environment or in a traditional hierarchical structure, and do differences in language, culture, educational or values in multicultural environments complicate their introduction?

Edward de Bono:

Where there’s a hierarchy and a boss who’s really enthusiastic, then a lot happens very quickly and the hierarchical system can be particularly effective. That was the case with Prudential in the USA. The head of Prudential was enthusiastic about my work and he introduced it into the company. However, if the corporate leader is not enthusiastic then it’s difficult to get anything done in a hierarchical culture. In theory a teamwork culture should make things easier but, unless the programme is taken seriously, it just doesn’t happen. A team might just play around with the ideas and would be less likely to recognize that they could do things better. So I would say that from my experience, a programme will be more powerful when introduced into a hierarchical system with a person at the top who recognizes its value.

While the challenges of globalization and ever increasing competition reinforce the need for greater emphasis on creativity, has the advent of new communications technology and media, changing and ever faster-paced working practices led to changes in your training approaches or tools?
Edward de Bono:

There have been no changes in our training approach because it is effective and personal. However, you have raised an interesting point. The introduction of computers into schools, while excellent in most regards, introduced the problem that youngsters start to believe there is no need to think because a computer enables you to search and to find the right answer somewhere. This is very dangerous.

Your book, *How to Have Creative Ideas*, offers 62 exercises to develop the mind and encourage creativity and lateral thinking. Many people assume creativity to be an inborn talent. To what extent can it be learned and developed, and are the games and exercises you have devised more likely to be enjoyed by a certain type of person?

Edward de Bono:

There is an important point I would like to make here, which is that language – certainly the English language but most others too I think – fails to distinguish between *artistic* creativity and *idea* creativity. We need to distinguish very clearly between the two. I’m talking about idea creativity. While many people in the world of music use my work – people such as Peter Gabriel, the Pet Shop Boys, the Eurythmics – I am not talking about their artistic creativity. I’m talking about idea creativity and in answer to your question: “can it be taught?”, I would answer: “definitely. It’s a skill. It’s a habit”. Some people will be better than others just as they are at tennis and golf; everyone can learn to play but some people are better than others. But idea creativity can be learned – it’s not some inborn, magic talent.

Some people will have an inherent propensity to creative thinking. It's all about motivation. It's the difference between enjoying possibilities and only being happy with certainties. Our methods and message are uncomfortable for some people, whereas a creative person loves exploring possibilities – it can be an emotional experience.

Looking at the many challenges facing the world today, where do you believe lateral thinking could be practised to the greatest potential benefit?

Edward de Bono:

This is a very relevant question. There are at least four mathematical reasons why new ideas are essential and yet representative bodies like democracies or the UN are unable to generate new ideas because they're a contradiction. Such bodies must represent current thinking, and new ideas are obviously not current thinking, which means there is a huge lack in the world of a place or platform for putting forward new ideas. To address this I recently launched a World Council for New Thinking. The Council’s members include no fewer than six Nobel Prize winners who will be joined by university chancellors and vice-chancellors, editors of significant publications, leading entrepreneurs and CEOs of major corporations. Our idea is to provide a very badly needed input of new ideas into world affairs.

There will be no agenda. It is effectively an internet-based platform for making visible new ideas. It works at two levels: one, the Council itself; the second, a League of New Thinkers. This is open to anyone who wishes to submit ideas. If their ideas are good enough, they’ll be invited to join the Council.

From time to time there may be a task force which will seek to generate ideas about important issues such as employment or Israel-Palestine...for example, just suppose that in Israel-Palestine the people were to be allowed to vote in each others’ elections; there is no way the Israelis would have elected Hamas – and there's no way the Palestinians would have elected Sharon... constructive people would be elected on both sides; and they'd find a way of working together. □

*Republished from Emerald Now, April 2007.*