

## CONCEPTUAL THINKING

Conceptual Thinking is the ability to identify patterns or connections between situations that are not obviously related, and to identify key or underlying issues in complex situations. It includes using creative, conceptual or inductive reasoning.

<b><i>This Means...</i></b>	<b><i>This Doesn't Mean...</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>challenging existing processes and procedures in order to improve them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>assuming that if there is not a problem, there is no need for improvement</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>looking for the common factors in different situations and using/modifying previously successful approaches to meet the unique needs of the situation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“reinventing the wheel” with every situation and overlooking common sources of difficulty, to focus on the peculiarities of each situation.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>listening to new ideas and recognizing their value in solving problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>thinking that problems that haven't been corrected or eliminated can't be</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>integrating and applying different ideas and approaches to accomplish a goal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>trying to force-fit standard approaches without considering alternatives</li> </ul>

**Developmental  
Activities****Levels A-B Activities**

**Ask yourself how often do you give yourself time to think about issues as opposed to just getting the job done?**

- Give yourself the opportunity to think quietly.
- Talk to people about the issue.
- Look for people who regularly introduce new thoughts and concepts. Spend time with them talking about your issue.
- Look for ways in which your thinking relates to other issues.

**Keep a log of situations at work for which you did not have a solution.**

- Write down in detail the nature of the situation and your thoughts about it.
- Review the log, consider what you thought at the time, and what you think now as you reconsider the situation.
- Write down alternative courses of action that could have benefited the situation.
- Make use of these actions in similar circumstances.

**Talk to others to get their ideas on issues, situations, problems, and potential opportunities.**

- Get another person's perspective.
  - ⇒ Talking through a problem or situation is a good technique to stimulating thought and developing insight. Getting another viewpoint adds more ideas and energy.

**Develop your conceptual thinking with simple exercises and conceptually-oriented games.**

- Pick a common item and identify 20 different uses for it (e.g., a fork, a drinking glass, a computer terminal, a shoe).
- Consider any two unrelated items and create a list of reasons they are similar (e.g., a pen and a coffee cup, a telephone and an orange).
- Play games like Pictionary, Whatzit!, Balderdash or Charades.

**Make a list of common referral opportunities among your clients/manager.**

- Review the "types" of clients and how best to deal with them.

- Ask your colleagues in other business units for their input on the referral opportunities. Ask questions. You want to gain insight into how someone else sees the situation.
- Incorporate these points of view into your own method of addressing these issues.

**Identify the leaders who set strategy for the business; understand their strategy in order to help you develop your own strategy for working.**

- Meet with your manager to discuss how you will meet with the leaders of the other business units.
- Spend a week gathering data, observing patterns, creating hypotheses, and summarizing themes.
- Summarize observations into a succinct presentation.
- Try to apply these observations into your own way of setting strategies in your area of responsibility.

### **Levels C-D Activities**

**“Brainstorm” solutions to a client problem before you draw conclusions or make a decision.**

- Choose a challenging problem that you are currently facing with a client that you have not resolved.
- List all the possible solutions that come to mind.
- Do not evaluate or critique any of the solutions or suggestions until you have exhausted all possible ideas.
- End your “brainstorming session” by identifying next steps.

**During the next two weeks make a list of unexpected client problems or issues that come up and think through the possible trends or patterns.**

- Examine the list and try to identify any common themes or similarities, and ask yourself the following questions:
  - ⇒ Have I seen this type of problem before?
  - ⇒ What do I already know that may help me to solve the problem?
  - ⇒ What may be the cause of the problem?
  - ⇒ Is there anything that could have prevented the problem from occurring? If yes, what action could have prevented it?

⇒ Is there anything I could have done to speed up my understanding of the problem?

- Note these themes on a piece of paper.
- Take action to make use of these identified trends in order to overcome similar situations in the future.

### **Build the requirement for more lateral thinking into your daily routine.**

- Identify a set of criteria that all options must meet; for example, a set budget, a given timeline for commuting, a specific duration for an activity, etc.
- Identify different ways of getting to and from home, or a different place to have lunch every day for a week, or a different activity to entertain yourself or your family every weekend for a month.
- Evaluate these alternatives against the above set of criteria.

### **Gather benchmark information about a current organizational problem.**

- Work with your manager to identify a problem which needs to be addressed within your department.
- Volunteer to work on developing a solution for the problem.
- Find out how others within and outside your organization have dealt with similar problems or situations.
- Document your findings and share them with your manager and co-workers. These can include:
  - ⇒ Summarizing a new trend/technique and presenting it to others.
  - ⇒ Doing a competitive analysis.
  - ⇒ Studying history and drawing business parallels.
  - ⇒ Participating in a cross-functional project.

### **Level E Activities**

#### **Prepare a presentation on how a new product or service will address customer needs.**

- This shouldn't be a long essay, just four or five key points based on your conceptual thinking of the new product, the existing products and your client's needs.
- Make the presentation to a group within your business unit or to your client.

### **Ask for input from those affected by the problem.**

- Identify those who are most affected by the problem.
- Ask them for information about the nature of the problem and for suggestions about possible solutions.
- Identify a number of possible courses of action and check out the feasibility of these alternatives with these same individuals or groups.
- Try to picture what you are trying to achieve. How does it look? Is there anything you would like to change? What one thing would you like to change in that picture?
- Think about what situation this particular problem reminds you of. Are there any interesting similarities or differences in the two scenarios? What can you learn from them?
- Imagine that you have no constraints to solve this issue or problem -- what would you do? Why would you do it? What prevents you from acting on the thoughts you have?
- Talk to people who are not familiar with the issue you are grappling with. This may include those from totally different areas of expertise or disciplines that you are used to -- what kinds of things do people come up with?
- Take the results of these approaches and try to come up with some novel solutions to your problem.
- Bounce your ideas off your boss or trusted colleagues.
- Try to learn from and incorporate the comments you have collected. Make some notes to yourself regarding some of the things that have helped you to become more creative.

### **Identify a persistent problem that has resisted solution.**

- Through discussion with appropriate management and staff, identify a persistent problem or limitation that has resisted resolution.
- Work on a plan that goes to the root of the problem or incorporates a different conceptual approach.
- Carefully think through the consequences of your plan or approach from the perspective of all stakeholders. Why will it succeed when the others have failed?
- Fine tune your plan or approach until you are confident that you have a feasible approach that will accomplish the objective and will add value.
- Present and review your plan with your manager or other stakeholders.

**Look at how technologies are being applied in different industries and determine how the underlying concepts could be applied in your organization.**

- Consider a variety of industries; for example, Manufacturing, Retail, Construction, Travel and Leisure, Pharmaceuticals, etc.
- Investigate how technology is providing solutions internally and externally and the underlying themes or patterns to which those solutions speak.
- Develop a concept for utilizing similar patterns or themes within your organization and a supporting business case or strategy paper.
- Present and review your concepts with appropriate management.

### Books and Videos

**A Whack On the Side of the Head: How to Unlock Your Mind for Innovation**, by R. von Oech (Warner Books, 1993).

*This book is a practical reference tool which will act as a sensible and motivating guide to improve your conceptual thinking.*

**Wall Street Journal, Business Week, or the Business Section of the New York Times.**

*These periodicals should give a lot of practice in reviewing the patterns that business writers see happening in the business world. It would obviously be a mistake to automatically apply to one's particular situation the concepts that such writers see in general across business situations. Knowing what is unique about one's own situation is a higher level exercise of this competency.*

**How and How Much Can Intelligence be Increased?**, by Douglas Detterman and Robert Sternberg (eds), (Norwood, N.J. Ablex, 1982).

*The authors provide a comprehensive review of the research on increasing intelligence.*

**Identifying and Solving Problems** (A systems approach) (2nd ed), by Roger Kaufman (San Diego, CA: University Associates, Inc. 1979).

*This compact but highly practical book provides simple techniques for distinguishing between means/solutions versus ends/goals as well as for identifying gaps between the current and desired state.*

**The Ideal Problem Solver: A Guide for Improving Thinking, Learning and Creativity**, by John Bransford (New York, New York: W.H. Freeman, 1993).

*This book incorporates a wealth of recent research on thinking and creativity. A detailed frame work for tackling problems is outlined.*

**The Art of Problem Solving, Accompanied by Ackoff's Fables**, by R. Ackoff (John Wiley & Sons 1978).

*The focus of this book is on innovation and creativity in the problem solving process.*

**Use Both Sides of Your Brain**, by Tony Buzan (New York: Dutton, 1983).

*This book contains practical ideas on how to learn more effectively and efficiently, solve problems and improve your memory.*

**Future Edge**, by Joel Arthur Barker (William Morrow & company, Inc. New York, 1992).

*The author discusses spotting trends, adapting to change and dealing with problems to improve results.*

**The Five-Day Course in Thinking**, by Edward de Bono (Penguin Books, 1969).

*In this classic book by the foremost thinker on lateral thinking, de Bono articulates that thinking is an enjoyable skill that can be developed directly. The book offers a series of simple but intriguing problems in thinking that are designed to help the reader discover their own personal style of thinking, its weaknesses and strengths.*

**The Jewel That Was Ours, The Secret of Annex 3. Last Bus to Woodstock**, (Bantam Books: various dates in the 1980's).

*Colin Dexter is quite clever at providing information that suggests a variety of alternative explanations for otherwise seemingly unrelated events.*

**Intelligence Applied: Understanding and Increasing Your Intellectual Skills**, by Sternberg, J. Harcourt (Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

*This book is probably the best single source of information that treats conceptual thinking as one of the competencies involved in intelligent behaviour. On the one hand, it provides a sound and convincing explanation of why such an intellectual competency must be treated in terms of the context in which it occurs. On the other, it provides many practical exercises the reader can employ to understand intellectual competencies better and to improve his or her skills.*

**The Mind's Best Work**, by D. Perkins (Harvard University Press, 1981).

*This book, by a member of the research team project zero, describes how people think conceptually and creatively. It also has exercises to help build conceptual thinking.*

**Breakthrough Thinking: Why We Must Change the Way We Solve Problems, and the Seven Principles to Achieve This**, by Gerald Nadir and Shozo Hibono (Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing and Communication, 1993).

*This book presents some novel ideas on how to approach problems based on the thought processes of great thinkers. It includes exercises you can do to practice their suggested approach. While the book can be a bit dry, most people will find some of the ideas useful.*

The video, “**Discovering the Future, The Business of Paradigms**”, by Joel Arthur Barker.

*The host and author talks about how existing paradigms can limit our thinking and talks about creating new paradigms to reshape and achieve new levels of performance.*

