

Edward de Bono: 'Iraq? They just need to think it through'

The father of lateral thinking tells Angela Balakrishnan why, 40 years on, his theories are as relevant as ever



- Angela Balakrishnan
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Edward de Bono: "Schools waste two-thirds of the talent in society. The universities sterilise the rest". Photographer: Christopher Thomond

Many of us have played the game where we ponder what power or skill we would pick if we were superhuman. Topping the list usually are the ability to fly, being invisible or even being able to speak every language in the world. The power to think, however, is not one that would normally jump to mind.

Yet for Edward de Bono, the man who 40 years ago coined the phrase "lateral thinking", the ability to think is the most important human skill, but one he feels is often neglected.

"What happened was, 2,400 years ago, the Greek Gang of Three, by whom I mean Aristotle, Plato and Socrates, started to think based on analysis, judgment and knowledge. At the same time, church people, who ran the schools and universities, wanted logic to prove the heretics wrong. As a result, design and perceptual thinking was never developed. People assumed philosophers were doing it and so they blocked anyone else from doing it. But philosophers were not. Philosophers may look out at the world from a stained-glass window, but after a while they stop looking at the world and start looking at the stained glass."

This is where de Bono believes he has changed things. Born in Malta into a family who had been doctors for seven generations, he gained a medical degree from the Royal University of Malta. But then, with a Rhodes scholarship, he found himself at Oxford, where he gained a degree in psychology and physiology and a DPhil in medicine. It was during this time, in the 1960s, that he realised his studies could be applied to the mind.

Principles explored

"I was looking at the glands, kidneys, circulation and respiration and the idea of self-organising systems," he says. "I realised that the same principles could be adapted to the neuron brain, which is when I wrote *The Mechanism of the Mind*."

His principles were explored in a computer-generated experiment, which found that if the brain worked in the way De Bono said it did, then routine was not good for creativity. "For the first time in history, thinking was based on what was happening in the human brain and not the words of philosophers."

His work is based on what he calls "operacy", the act of doing things, which helps to generate fresh ideas, something he believes the UK lacks. "The west is complacent and offensive," he says. "The east has more energy for change, and so I think they will rise above the west."

While he rates Gordon Brown as more of a thinker than many of his fellow cabinet members, he believes society stands to benefit from becoming more inventive. "There are individuals who are inventive, but as a society as a whole, we are not."

He says that, with the help of more lateral thinking, many issues that dominate the political agenda could move beyond stalemate. "Look at Iraq. If the US said they were going to leave on a certain date, then for every week without any killings, the date would move forward, and for every week with a killing, the later and later the date would be delayed. This way those who killed would not be seen as heroes but those keeping the Americans in the country."

It may not be the most conventional approach to international relations but it is, in de Bono's words, a case of "thinking outside the box".

"Let me tell you a joke," he says. "An old man dies and goes to hell. When he gets there, he sees his friend, a 90-year old man, with a beautiful woman sitting on his knee. He says to his friend, 'This can't be hell, you're not being punished, you're having fun!', to which his friend replies, 'This is punishment - for her!'"

While this gag may seem like average pub banter, de Bono points out that it highlights a key element about thought. "Humour is by far the most significant activity of the human brain," he says. "What the joke displays is a switch in perception. This is important in changing the way we think."

"Studies have shown that 90% of error in thinking is due to error in perception. If you can change your perception, you can change your emotion and this can lead to new ideas. Logic will never change emotion or perception."

He gives an example. "My thinking was taught to tribes in South Africa like the Zulus and Xhosas. At the time there were about 210 fights breaking out among them every month, but after they listened to my lessons, this fell to just four."

"Take violent youngsters. A study was carried out with a follow-up 20 years later. The rate of criminal conviction for those taught creative thinking as a skill was less than a tenth; there was a 90% reduction. Then there were workers under the New Deal [New Labour's programme to get young unemployed into jobs]. The employment rate for those who learned to think went up by 500%. A year later, 96% were still in employment."

Many of his critics dismiss his books and seminars as "psychobabble" or claim De Bono simply states the obvious. But the 73-year-old shrugs this off. "When people say this I ask, 'Do you understand these concepts?', and usually the answer is no. If you can see things differently, you can make a big difference. Furthermore, the practical research and results are there. You can't deny it."

Arguing with him over this would be pointless since De Bono does not believe in arguments. "They are the most crude way of getting a solution," he says. "Usually in an argument, I can see the other person's point of view. It comes down to three basic things: different information, different perception and different values. Once you can see where people come from you can consider if the other person has better information and compare their values and perceptions to yours. I am willing to listen."

In his book *Six Thinking Hats*, De Bono expounds on his technique for teaching the brain to look at a problem from a variety of angles. "At a conference in California, a businesswoman came up to me and asked how she could use the Six Hats to make her point. But that is not its purpose," he says. "For instance, say you are at a meeting discussing an idea, by putting on the yellow hat everyone is asked to try and find some value in the idea. If you are the only one in the room who cannot see value when everyone can, you will look stupid."

The purpose, he says, is to open up the mind and stop people from acting defensively. The benefits of this would not just help businesses but could perform a crucial role in education.

Despite being quite the academic himself, holding professorships at the universities of Pretoria, Dublin City and the University of Advancing Technology in Phoenix, Arizona, De Bono has vigorous views on the education system. "Schools waste two-thirds of the talent in society. The universities sterilise the rest," he says.

He extends this view, saying that the problem with education committees in the UK is that they are run by educators. "Committees should have no educators on them at all. Educators want to do what they did at school. They look backwards." And while technology may be seen as moving

education forward, De Bono is wary about the use of computers in schools, saying it encourages laziness among youngsters who think they can search for the answer on the internet.

Instead, he believes that creative thinking should be taught at school as he says it is in many institutions across India, Venezuela, Canada and Australia. He describes recent research in one Australian school where science pupils were taught less science and more creative thinking. The students did better in exams than those who had focused on science.

Yet he still holds the sciences in high esteem. The self-titled "global peripatetic educator", whose career has taken him to the far corners of the Earth, was in Macclesfield last week to open the Northwest Science Strategy in Alderley Edge.

Contributing factor

The event certainly gives an insight into how widespread his following is. With his 70 publications translated into 34 languages, De Bono's thinking has penetrated a range of cultures and classes.

Many prominent artists from the music world, such as the Eurythmics and Pet Shop Boys, have said their work has benefited from De Bono's thinking.

This concept that thinking transcends all environments and upbringings is reflected in De Bono's own lifestyle. His base is a rented apartment off Piccadilly, London, but he also spends time in Venice, Ireland and the Bahamas.

While he says that environment is only a contributing factor in the way a person thinks, it has presumably been of benefit to his two sons, Caspar, the managing director of FT Magazines, and Charles, an architect. Which prompts a question: does he believe that a person possesses certain characteristics that make them more susceptible to creative thinking?

"No," he says. "Creative thinking - in terms of idea creativity - is not a mystical talent. It is a skill that can be practised and nurtured. You can never tell how a policy has been reached just by looking at the end result. Some people who have achieved a huge amount do not come across as impressive when you speak to them."

So what can we tap into that will make us all lateral thinkers?

"There isn't just one point; it takes time to learn. You don't have to be intelligent, but I think you have to be open to possibilities and willing to explore. The only stupid people are those who are arrogant and closed off."

He says it all with such gusto that it makes deliberations over favourite superpowers seem futile, when really all we need, it would appear, is our minds.

Curriculum vitae

Age: 73

Job: Designer of thinking, academic, founder of Cognitive Research Trust, corporate training guru

Books include: The Use of Lateral Thinking (in which he coined the term 'lateral thinking'), Six Thinking Hats, The Mechanism of the Mind, Six Value Medals, How to Have a Beautiful Mind, I Am Right, You Are Wrong, Serious Creativity

Likes: boiled beef, peace and quiet, Australia

Dislikes: thoughtless people, thoughtless behaviour

Divorced, two children, three grandchildren