Lateral Thinking

Idea In Short

Logical analysis moves step by step along a path, and that path may lead nowhere new. Edward de Bono introduced lateral thinking in 1967 as a deliberate way to leave an established pattern of thought and approach a problem from another direction. His best-known tool is the provocation, a statement that is deliberately illogical, flagged with the signal word po, and used as a stepping stone to new ideas. A manager can apply the method by stating a provocative claim, suspending judgment, and asking what useful idea it suggests. Critics note that the approach lacks rigorous testing, so treat it as a source of hypotheses. Try one provocation on a stalled problem today.

Experienced managers know the moment when every sensible option has been listed and none of them works. Further analysis tends to repeat the same reasoning. Lateral thinking offers a different move: step sideways, disturb the pattern, and see what new options appear. This article explains where the method comes from, how its main tool works, what critics say, and how a team can apply it responsibly.

Where the idea came from

Wikipedia's entry on the topic reports that the Maltese psychologist Edward de Bono first used the term lateral thinking in 1967, in his book The Use of Lateral Thinking. The entry says that de Bono deliberately distanced the approach from the standard view of creativity as vertical logic, which is the classic method of problem solving.1 De Bono also linked lateral thinking with humor, since both involve a switch from a familiar pattern to a new, unexpected one.

Penguin published his textbook on the subject, and its author note describes him as a writer with faculty appointments at the universities of Oxford, London, Cambridge, and Harvard.2 The same note says that leading business organizations sought his instruction in thinking, which helps explain why his vocabulary spread through corporate training.

Why patterns trap us

The theory rests on an observation about the mind. A guide to provocation and movement from the University of Udine's creativity handbook explains that people think by recognizing patterns and reacting to them. The same habit that makes experts fast also keeps them within familiar routes, because each situation triggers the pattern that has worked before.

This explanation helps managers see why discussion often loops. The group matches the problem to a known pattern, applies the known solution, and finds that it fails. Further talk tends to refine the same pattern. A tool that forces the group out of the pattern gives it a chance to find a new one.

The provocation and po

De Bono's key tool is the provocation. The Udine handbook describes provocation and movement as a lateral technique that works by moving thinking out of the established patterns used to solve problems, and it explains that de Bono popularized the word po, which stands for provocative operation, to label a provocation in public.3

A provocation is an idea that need not be true or sensible. Its function is to move thinking forward to a place from which new ideas may be found. A manager might say, po, our customers pay us only when we fail, or po, the product has no price. Neither statement is a recommendation. Each is a device for escaping the usual frame.

Movement: the second half

A provocation does nothing without movement. After someone states a provocation, the group suspends judgment and asks what it suggests. If customers pay only when we fail, the group might think of guarantees, performance-based fees, or insurance. If the product has no price, the group might think of free trials, sponsorship, or advertising.

De Bono gave an example in which a provocation about river pollution proposed that a factory is downstream of itself. The statement forces people to consider the relationship between a plant's water intake and its discharge, and it points toward ideas about accountability for pollution.4 The key discipline is to extract a principle from the provocation and then ask whether it can work in the real world.

Six Thinking Hats as a companion

De Bono later developed a related method for groups. Atlassian's guide explains that he described the Six Thinking Hats in a 1985 book, in which participants put on metaphorical hats that each represent a distinct type of thinking.5 The hats keep a group from mixing facts, feelings, caution, and creativity in one tangled debate. A team can use the green hat for lateral exploration and then switch to other hats to evaluate what it found. The hats also help with timing, since each type of thinking receives its own slot. Leaders who find that meetings drift between idea generation and criticism can ask everyone to wear the same hat for ten minutes. The discipline gives lateral ideas room to develop before the group tests them, and it reduces the chance that an early objection ends the discussion.

A working routine

A team can use lateral thinking in four steps:

1. State the stalled problem and the standard approaches
2. Write three provocations, each marked po
3. Move from each provocation by listing ideas and underlying principles
4. Convert promising ideas into testable options and judge them against criteria

The third step separates the method from random idea generation. The group asks what real mechanism a provocation points toward, and it keeps the mechanism while discarding the absurd surface. The fourth step restores logic, since creativity without evaluation produces only noise. Allow about thirty minutes for the whole routine, and assign a facilitator who keeps the group from judging provocations during step three. Record every provocation and every idea, including those that fail, because a rejected idea sometimes becomes useful when conditions change.

Ways to write a provocation

De Bono described several ways to construct provocations, and teams can use them as prompts. Reversal turns a standard statement into its opposite, as in po, the customer pays the supplier less when the product works. Exaggeration pushes a feature to an extreme, as in po, every order arrives within one minute. Distortion changes the order of events, as in po, the invoice comes before the order. Wishful thinking states an impossible hope, as in po,

the product repairs itself.

Each prompt has a different effect. Reversal exposes unstated rules, exaggeration reveals what really matters about a feature, and distortion questions the sequence of a process. Wishful thinking highlights the outcome that people truly want. A team can try one prompt of each kind in a session and compare the principles that emerge. The variety keeps the exercise fresh and spreads the creative load across several mental moves.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a regional delivery company facing late deliveries. Standard answers include more drivers, better routing software, and bigger vans. The team writes provocations. Po, customers collect their own parcels. Po, deliveries happen at night. Po, the driver never leaves the depot.

The group moves from each statement. The first suggests pickup points in shops, which could reduce stops. The second suggests quieter roads and off-hours delivery windows. The third suggests relay hubs in which drivers swap loads at fixed points, reducing travel. The team tests pickup points in two neighborhoods and finds that they cut missed deliveries. The result came from a provocation that nobody would have proposed in a serious meeting.

What critics say

Wikiwand's summary of the topic reports that critics have characterized lateral thinking as pseudo-scientific, arguing that de Bono's core ideas have never been rigorously tested or corroborated. The criticism deserves attention. It does not mean that provocations never produce good ideas, but it does mean that leaders should not accept claims about their reliability without evidence.

A sensible stance is to treat lateral techniques as sources of hypotheses. Use them to widen the list of options and then judge the options with data, experiments, and sound analysis. Track the results over time, so that the team learns whether the exercises produce better outcomes in its own setting. Compare the options that a lateral session produced with those that ordinary discussion produced, and note which ones survived testing. That comparison turns an appealing technique into an evidence-based practice and shows the team how

much weight to give the method.

- 1Lateral thinking
- 2Lateral thinking: a textbook of creativity
- 3Provocation and movement
- 4Lateral thinking
- 5Six Thinking Hats: what is it and where did it come from?

Summary

Lateral thinking supplements logic with deliberate disruption. De Bono argued that the mind builds patterns and that useful new ideas often require stepping outside them, which a provocation can force. The tool works through movement, meaning that the group moves from a provocative statement to the ideas it suggests without judging it first. The approach has fans in business and critics in science, who point out that its core claims have not been tested rigorously. A sensible stance is to use lateral techniques to generate options and to rely on evidence to decide among them. Choose a stalled problem, write one provocation, and move from it to three concrete ideas.