Thinking Managers

Edward de Bono of www.thinkingmanagers.com explains why intelligent people are not always better thinkers.

Frameworks and Thinking

Intelligent people are better thinkers. You might assume this statement to be true, because that is part of our definition of intelligence. An intelligent person is assumed to be more capable of thinking than other people.

In my experience across a very wide range of people, though, this seemingly obvious statement is not true.

Someone might be very good at analysis and yet poor at design thinking or operational thinking. This is the thought process needed to make things happen.

For 'design' you assemble things to deliver a desired value. Excellence at analysis might not necessarily mean the same thing in design.

Intelligent people are able to comprehend and absorb information more easily. So they usually have more information to work with. Sometimes the correct information is a substitute for thinking. Intelligent people working in a field pick up the idiom of that field and are capable of working with information in that field. The result can be a good new idea. But take the same mind and apply it to a completely new field, and the generalised skill of thinking is not there.

Intelligence is the 'potential'. Thinking is the skill. Thinking and intelligence often overlap in the area of understanding, but can diverge in other areas. For example, an intelligent person may take up a view on a subject. This view could be determined by personal experience, emotions and perhaps prejudice. The intelligence is then used to argue this view.

This cannot be described as effective thinking. Effective thinking involves exploration of the subject, the generation of alternative views, listening to the views of others, considering the context and purpose of the thinking - and then designing a way forward. Defence of a point of view is not enough, no matter how brilliant the argument might be.

There are general habits and intentions which effective thinkers are meant to have. These would perhaps include considering all factors, generating alternatives, listening to others, defining the objective. While these might exist as intentions, they are not always used by thinkers.

I once asked a group of 250 top women executives whether it would be a good idea to pay women 15% more than men for doing just the same job. As many as 86% thought it a great idea (and about time too!). I then instructed the group to do a C&S.

This is one a simple 'attention-directing' tools used in primary schools. It means directing attention to instant consequences and then long-term consequences. In small teams the executives 'did a C&S' and those in favour of the idea fell from 86% to 15%. Each of those people, however, would have claimed that as a senior executive she looked at consequences all the time.

Attitudes and intentions can be weak. Specific operating tools - even if they appear to be artificial - are much more powerful. A task is given a definition and then undertaken. The thinker carries out the task and then reacts to the improved perception.

According to David Perkins of Harvard, 90% of the mistakes of thinking are errors of perception. Goedel's theorem posits that you cannot ever logically prove the starting point of your logic. The starting point is arbitrary perception. That shows the importance of perception and also 'attention-directing tools'.

There is an enormous amount that can be done to improve human thinking. Intelligence, information and analysis are not enough by themselves.

About the author:
Edward de Bono is the world's leading authority in the field of creative thinking and the teaching of thinking as a skill.