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Summary

Complex business issues are often multi-faceted and difficult to evaluate. This complexity is compounded when different people take different perspectives at the same time and argue cross-purposes, from different points of view, when taking the same perspective would produce greater mutual understanding and reveal legitimate differences.

Creativity researcher Edward de Bono proposes a systematic approach to issue consideration that allows a group to share perspectives, and thus evaluate complex issues faster and completely. Energy otherwise spent miscommunicating is directed toward legitimate differences of opinion and profitable decision making.

By James Bergstrom
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States and Traits

“I’m a positive person.”
“Vivek can be so negative sometimes.”
“Alexa is so aloof, it’s like she just has her head in the clouds.”

We have all heard statements like these about other people. Maybe we have made them about ourselves. But the truth is that we are more versatile than these simple characterizations suggest.

Given the remarkable human capacity for perspective taking, people can actually control what perspective they take with regard toward an issue. This ability for examining issues from different angles is highlighted in high school debate: teams advocate for the subject assigned to them regardless of their actual underlying beliefs. We may not each possess sufficient mental discipline to take a given perspective at will, but with the help of an experienced facilitator it is not hard to follow their guidance and experience their “frame of reference.”

The truth is that we are positive toward certain things and negative toward others. We are emotional at certain times and intellectual at others. It is helpful to recognize that most experiences arise as short-lived states, in which we respond positively or negatively, intellectually or emotionally. Contrast this opposed to permanent and enduring traits, in which a person “is always negative” or “is so emotional.”

Thus it is far more meaningful to say “I can look at something positively or negatively, objectively or subjectively. I can describe my own emotional response to something.” Experiencing an issue from different perspectives affords us the opportunity to paint a more complete picture of the factors at play.

We can use the fact that we are capable of taking different frames of reference to our advantage when weighing complex issues.
Six Critical Perspectives

Debating an issue from different perspectives leads all too often to cross-purpose miscommunication. It is more profitable to consider facets of a thorny issue together, so legitimate differences in judgment can be evaluated collectively instead of degenerating into adversarial arguments and self-interested hostility.

De Bono† identifies six perspectives that can be examined jointly to diminish such miscommunication. The perspectives are color-coded for easier reference.

Consider the scenario of a new order management system that is behind schedule.

White: Facts.

The white perspective focuses on the facts of the issue. Think of a sheet of paper covered with facts. Examples include:

- We are two months behind schedule and estimate another month to complete.
- Customers have been complaining about the old system since February.
- If we change vendors now we will lose $500,000 and three months worth of work.

By reporting “just the facts” we avoid unhelpful condemnation, criticism, and frustration. Often as we share the hard facts we find gaps in information that must be reconciled before we have enough information to make coherent decisions.

Red: Feelings.

The red perspective acknowledges the emotions associated with an issue. Think of the blood coursing through your heart or your gut as you respond viscerally. Examples include:

- I hate when we roll out production upgrades, something always goes wrong.
- Sharma is going to feel threatened if we switch vendors, since she brought these people into the deal.
- Customers are going to love the new system! I’m so excited to announce it!

By acknowledging our own feelings and recognizing the feelings of others we incorporate that immediate visceral response in our decision making process instead of denying the emotionality of an issue—only to be blindsided when our change initiative is stalled and sabotaged.

(†) De Bono, Edward. Six Thinking Hats. (1985)
Green: Growth Potential.

The green perspective provides an opportunity to look at the creative possibilities that arise from an issue. Think of grass sprouting from a seed. Examples include:

- The new vendor also handles inventory so we might be able to consolidate all of our logistical services.
- If we apply some ingenuity I bet we could provide our customers with order status online.
- Nothing stops us from running a customer satisfaction survey once our orders ship. That feedback could help refine the order and shipping process as we go forward.

By considering areas for growth, creativity and innovation are systematically encouraged and yet more opportunities to profit from a situation can be uncovered. Usually the resolution of a complex issue is not an end in itself, but opens the door to enhanced products and services.

Blue: The Big Picture.

The blue perspective keeps the focus on the overall objective to be addressed by considering the issue. Think of the vast sky containing all the other perspectives. Examples include:

- I appreciate your skepticism about the rollout, but let’s focus on benefits at this (yellow) stage.
- I haven’t heard a single objection. Who can think of some negative (black) factors?
- How do you expect the competition to respond? (white)

By keeping the big picture in mind the group stays task-oriented and productive. This perspective is usually maintained by the group facilitator, and can be raised by group members when digressions or tangents bog down the discussion.

Black: Negative.

The black perspective accounts for all the bad things associated with an issue. Think of the bad guy in a Western. Examples include:

- If we don’t finish this on schedule we’ll lose thousands each day.
- We don’t have enough staff to work with a new vendor.
- The new system is too hard to administer. Besides most customers are used to the old system.

By identifying potential problems, hazards, risks, and excessive costs we can plan accordingly without needless frustration and blame. At the same time, resist the urge to “fix” problems at this stage. The black perspective allows a full examination of the downside of an issue. This is similar to appointing a devil’s advocate to compensate for groupthink.

Yellow: Positive.

The yellow perspective emphasizes all the good things associated with an issue. Think of a beam of sunlight. Examples include:

- The new system will be much easier for new customers to use, which will increase the number of orders they place with us.
- Because it is best-of-breed we can hire experts to run the system rather than train them.
- After two years the monthly savings offset the current cost of the upgrade.

With the focus on benefits, savings, and advantages a renewed sense of excitement and enthusiasm for the issue can arise. Furthermore, a positive orientation reminds participants that their effort is not in vain. The item under consideration holds the promise of some benefit for the organization.
While managerial judgment is still required to determine the best course of action, the core problems of miscommunication and one-dimensional analysis can be eliminated using this approach.

If your organization is stifled by conflicting perspectives, mediation and business therapy can help. Whether you need business advice, professional coaching, or custom seminars and training, professionalign is committed to your success.

The professionalign mission is:

“To convert organizational problems into innovation and profit.”

Thank you for your interest in this research article. If we can be of service to your organization please contact us.

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Six Critical Perspectives

Quick Reference

**White: Facts.**
Consider the facts, figures, and statistical data associated with an issue.

**Red: Feelings.**
Acknowledge your emotional response and that of your coworkers, as well as the possible response from customers.

**Black: Negative.**
Consider the risks, costs, effort, and potential downside of an issue.

**Yellow: Positive.**
Consider the value, benefits, advantages, and potential upside of an issue.

**Green: Growth Potential.**
Think of opportunities for expansion, creative possibilities, and new options that the issue enables.

**Blue: The Big Picture.**
Keep the overall objective in mind and ensure a productive, viable decision is reached.