**Lateral Thinking in Policy Formulation**

[Saad Masood](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/saad-masood/" \o "More Articles by Saad Masood)

June 9, 2022

The Greeks have given us many things – democracy, philosophy, architecture, mythology, the Olympics – the list goes on. Another highly valuable Greek contribution to this world is logic. It was Aristotle, Plato and Socrates who were its biggest proponents and underpinned it with knowledge, analysis and judgement. Subsequently, societies were steeped in logical thinking and the same notion runs through all social strata today including the policy-making elite. The approach is relatively simple; i.e. gather as much information as possible to provide context, examine the facts and define objectives, evaluate options and then select one particular course of action. The result is a policy with clearly defined aims and ends. This method of using vertical thinking – another phrase for logical thought – for policy formulation has worked well for some time. With excessive globalisation, abundant information, an everchanging environment and incessant social media, perhaps this is the time to introduce the notion of lateral thinking in policy formulation.

Edward De Bono is credited with coining the phrase lateral thinking in the 1960s. In this model, people approach problems by using reasoning that is non-linear, disruptive and not immediately obvious. This is also called horizontal thinking and opposes the conventional method of vertical thinking where an analytical, step-by-step approach is used to vertically go through information bit-by-bit and is akin to following a recipe where the start and end points are known especially based on past experiences and solutions. By this method, it is less likely that any new solutions are found. De Bono himself said, “you cannot dig a hole in a different place by digging the same hole deeper!”

While policy formulation may seem quite a leap away from lateral thinking, it can still benefit from this new way of thinking. Consider the following approach.

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One, dump judgement of ideas. Although there can be many policy options, people may be disinclined to voice new possibilities due to fear of judgement. Therefore, one of the foremost requirements is to leave judgement at the door for every policy session; e.g. governmental, corporate and military. Two, encourage diversity in discourse. This is important as assimilating many viewpoints will generally result in more and better opportunities to put a policy together. This is especially useful in a labour market policy. Three, build on policy alternates. A policy can always be more specific than originally suggested. For this reason, it is always valuable to keep the policy argument going right until it is felt that the most granular variation of the policy is accomplished. For example, a health policy that doesn’t serve the lowest rung of society may not be fit for purpose as such. Four, encourage random entries. Run of the mill, routine policies generate results which are just as mundane as the policy itself. This is especially true in the annals of foreign policy which needs to be cognizant of quick-changing alliances, fast-paced world events and highly volatile information! Five, first challenge and then harvest. It is crucial to critically evaluate a policy before it is finalised. Playing devil’s advocate is one way to question the policy to iron out any deficiencies before harvesting it to articulate it in a manner that is suitable for the objectives under consideration. This can come in particularly handy when governments formulate economic policy because it is fundamental to releasing further potential to all other areas of government!

It is not easy to adapt to a new way of working after years of doing the same thing over and over again. There within lies the rub; i.e. even for one to change, one has to think about the change! And that luxury is in short supply nowadays! Therefore moving from a vertical mindset to a horizontal outlook with regard to policy formulation is a difficult task at best. But it must have endeavoured because the old way is no longer sufficient for modern times. To extend the critical need for lateral thinking in policy formulation, observe the following example given by De Bono himself. Imagine there is a money lender who claims a merchant’s daughter in lieu of her father’s debt. They aim to resolve this dilemma with the money lender putting a black stone in one bag and a white stone in another. If the daughter chooses the white stone – she will remain with her father and the debt will be cancelled. If she picks the black stone – she will marry the money lender and the debt will be cancelled. All three of them are standing on a pebble laden path and the daughter is about to make her choice when she notices that the money lender has put a black stone in both bags. How does she elegantly get out of this devilish predicament? Often the same difficult choices are on offer in policy-making, especially in international relations where a graceful window of exit is routinely needed – for you and your foe! In the example, one option is for the daughter to start screaming and identify the con. This would be the vertical thinking at play and would definitely pit both parties against each other! The better option – underpinned by horizontal thinking – would be for the daughter to pick either bag but fumble and drop her stone onto the path. Since the remaining pebble is of course black, it can be safely assumed she picked the white pebble because the money lender dare not admit dishonesty. In foreign policy, it is frequently the case where one needs to allow the opponent a gracious withdrawal and that conceivably can only come through lateral thinking!

Edward De Bono passed away in 2021 but his notion of lateral thinking endures and lives on. It has become the cornerstone of creativity, innovation and out-of-the-box thinking – something that all policy making practitioners can benefit from in times of global change and international upheaval specifically when traditional paradigms are unlikely to achieve the desired output in this new world!

*The writer is Director Programmes for an international ICT organization based in the UK and writes on corporate strategy, socio-economic and geopolitical issues.*