A Tool of Thought

"What the hell were they thinking?"

This is probably the most uttered phrase these days. Actually, it seems to almost be an anthem to those who scratch their heads in wonder. Let's face it, we are standing in some deep manure throughout many areas of our society and what got into this situation, as well as what will get us out of it comes entirely down to how we think.

There is someone who once said that the thinking which got you into a situation is not going to be the same thinking which will get you out of it. Albert Einstein said, "Thinking that doing the same thing over and over and expecting change is the definition of insanity." These statements are a testament to all of our thinking processes.

Back in the day, when I was teaching at a technical school, I was asked to create a new class for the students which would benefit them in their chosen field of employment. I was given free rein to develop the curriculum and use whatever supporting text required to fulfill the needs of the course. The only concern which the dean had was that whatever I created, it had to fit each of the three different student groups we were serving without having to be customized for any one of them.

I spent several weeks previewing the needs of the employers of our students in an attempt of determine just what would benefit each in the short term but also over the long run. The fact that this had to apply to all three classifications of students made this a rather arduous endeavor.

During this time, I was introduced to some work written by Dr. Edward DeBono who is a world renown expert on creative thinking. Reading through a number of his books, I discovered he had developed a program on how to teach a person how to think and do it creatively. His CoRT program was divided into 6 modules, each having around 10 lessons to explore. The first section was a core module which brought a number of tools to the student to hone their thinking skills and would subsequently be the basis for moving through the other 5 modules of the course.

I immediately recognized how this program was what I was looking for to supplement the students. Most people believe that when you go to school the most basic skill you should walk away with is thinking, right? Regrettably, it's not. The most basic skill is memorization. This is the only activity that guarantees a student will be able to pass a test. This was true then, and regrettably, still hold up today. Ask a student to think, critically, or even creatively, and they will look at you like bull frogs in a hailstorm.

So, to make a long story short, we implemented the CoRT program for our students, and while met with a heavy dose of skepticism, quickly became a source of anticipation throughout the weeks for both me, as the instructor, and the students. The program gave us an opportunity to move outside of our normal processes of thinking and expand into uncharted areas which brought the diversity of people into a common arena for a real social discourse of discovery.

I want to offer to you some of the basic tools which the first CoRT lesson presents as tools for thinking. I know that many of you think you don't need this; however, you will be surprised at how affective these tools can be in your everyday life. Even after all these years I am still using them unconsciously in all my interactions. If you want to explore this in greater depth, I recommend that you go to the CoRT thinking site for additional information.

Why tools?

The CoRT modules are designed to enhance your present thinking style as well as add new avenues to thought you never considered. Now you might believe that your thinking is working just fine for you whether you are a fry cook or a brain surgeon (in thinking parlance, there really is no difference between the two). However, there is something you might never have considered: you're stuck in a rut.

Actually, your brain is simply a rut storage device. When we encounter a new situation the very first thing that we instinctively do is look for a pattern to see if we have encountered this before. Previous situations have developed a neuro pathway in our brain causing us to slide through life for the most part. Consider the fight, flight or freeze mechanism which every animal possesses as a survival tool. This is the effect of a pattern recognition system, and while we are not out in the wild trying to survive, the instincts still exist within us only in a different manner.

Let me demonstrate. What did you have for dinner last night? How often over the past three months have you prepared and eaten the same thing, maybe with a slight modification? Now, you might say, "Well, I didn't have anything else in the kitchen." But, why was what you had also the same ingredients which have been in the kitchen all the other times? How often have you gone to the store, taken the same route to get there, parked in the same area of the parking lot, and went into the store following the same path down the same aisles, skipping past some, lingering in others, looking for the stuff which will become the next weeks meals – meals which you have shopped for over so many years.

Shopping is an exercise in pattern recognition.   You think you want something, and your brain instantaneously recalls the pattern of necessary events, sights, sounds, smells, and emotions which make this thought a reality – again. Shopping isn't the only activity this occurs in. You do the same thing when you are around people, going to a movie or concert, reading a book, listening to music, driving to work, everything you do! Your thinking is in a rut by design.

The CoRT toolkit gives you a new perspective, or as someone told me once, "It widened my ruts enough for me to turn around when I wanted to." Your life is not going to make a radical shift, unless that it your plan, but it will open up new vistas that have always been there, only you've never looked up to see them. Additionally, you will begin to wonder why others around you can't and don't use them too.

The tools

Simplicity. When you start telling people about the CoRT system, their first patterned response is to pull back in apprehension because thinking is so…so…daunting! Especially if you must do it on purpose. They imagine complex formulas and diagrams along with scientific jargon that you are required to master to move you into the next level of brain mastery. Nonsense! This is so simple that a 5-year-old child can master it - which is good thing since this is who we really are deep down inside.

The first module of CoRT has ten tools to work with. When using them there is no real order for them to be employed which is handy because you develop your own style with them. Each one can be utilized as the need presents itself. The only thing I want to stress is that you recognize the purpose is to get you out of your rut by looking at things from another angle. What you do after this may be exactly what you've always done, but the potential for something different will heighten your thinking style.
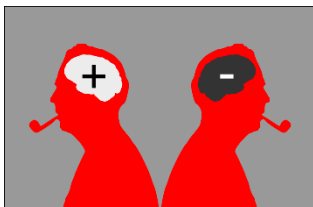
Positive, Minus, Interesting (PMI)

You're going to go out to dinner, and you have a favorite shirt or blouse you want to wear. Here is where the first tool can come into play. What are the positive things about wearing this article of clothing? You can quickly generate many probably. Now, what are a few of the minus things about wearing it? Notice I said, "a few." Our brains are calibrated to find a plethora of negative things about anything and typically this is the first thing we do! This tool is intentional in making you think of the positive things first and then purposely limiting the number of negative things next.

The last aspect of this tool is asking yourself what would be the interesting things which might occur from this. Here is where you get a designed opportunity to think creatively if just for a moment. In this example you may think about what could be another activity which could be done after dinner which this article of clothing is perfectly suited for. The important thing to remember here is that you are not to run a judgment on any of the ideas which are created in this step. Just let them pop up.

This tool is a great conversation generator for young children. Pick any topic and run a PMI with them and watch how their minds will kick into gear. With adults you got to be a little more intentional about this for the first few runs, but it quickly becomes a means to explore a situation in a quick amount of time.

Consider All Factors (CAF)

This might at first glance seem just like the previous tool, but it differs simply because you don't place a value judgement upon the factors. Simply list out all the factors you can think of for a particular situation. The goal with this tool is to broaden your vision. Obviously, you can't think of everything, however, most people have limited just how far they will think. This tool is used to break that habit.

Let's take a very current matter and see how it might play out. The pandemic. What factors have we discovered weren't considered at the start of this matter? Did anyone think about the economic

implications to states which shut down? Did anyone think about the cross-country trucking industry and how drivers would be able to take their mandatory rests in different states? Did anyone consider how working from home would impact the commercial real estate market? Did anyone consider the emotional impact graduating seniors would experience not being able to celebrate with their class friends their final achievement? Did anyone consider the emotional impact on senior citizens who would not be able to be with their family members during their final days of life?

I could go on and on with this since each situation has a whole cavalcade of issues which weren't and still need to be addressed, only if you're willing to think about it for a period of time. Once these factors have been brought into the light, you can run a PMI on them and see what new insights are revealed.

Consequences (C&S)

Every action has an equal reaction. This tool hones your ability to look at what your actions will produce. C&S is consequences and sequel, the result of an action, the timeframe when that result will appear, and what future ramifications could transpire from it.

Most of us think only of the present moment. The advantage of this tool is how it forces you to look down the road a bit and see how things might unfold from a decision. While in the short term an action might have negative consequences, it is possible that over a longer duration of time the consequences might become more favorable, even desirable. This also can run in the opposite direction where a decision can be favorable in the short run and highly unfavorable over the long haul. It is this forcing oneself to look ahead that sharpens the thinking process.

Goals (AGO)

Goals are important because they give you a pathway to follow towards their fulfillment. Aims, Goals and Objectives (AGO) is a tool to help declare and refine the purpose of an objective. It's good to have a goal, but what is its purpose and how many ways can the same purpose be achieved? Most people fall into the trap of believing once you determine what a goal is, they should never have to re-evaluate its objective against current conditions. This tool helps to clarify what is the broad picture, its purpose, and what means will be employed to get there.

Priorities (FIP)

If you're going to make a cake, what is the first thing you need to do? Assemble the ingredients? Gather the utensils? Making a cake is a task in first important priorities (FIP). Steps need to be considered and advanced in an order which achieves the desired end result. This is why almost every baking recipe begins with preheating the oven. If it's not hot once you've gotten everything combined, your cake is not going to rise like it should.

Every project or decision to be made has one or two things which must be done first. This tool helps to clarify what are the one or two items which will set the course of events into action and will help achieve the desired result.

Viewpoints (OPV)

There is an old saying that tells us if you want to know a person, you need to walk in their moccasins for a day. Other points of view (OPV) is a tool that makes you consider how others would be affected by a decision or circumstances. Its greatness is in allowing us "walk in their moccasins" for a moment and utilize all the tools from their unique perspective. Doing this often brings priorities or factors which might have been neglected or overlooked into the mix for a fuller presentation. These viewpoints can be based on age, gender, nationality, economics, really anything which looks at the issue from the side different than our own.

These are just a few of the tools which are available in the CoRT program, but they are powerful in their own. Their use is founded on the basic assumption that you can find a better, more novel way to think creatively. This doesn't mean that you'll become more artsy; simply that you will get out of your rut of making decisions.

One of the benefits of using these tools I have found is the ease and speed in which you can employ one or many of the when considering a subject. Just writing this out has been an exercise in creative thinking. I had to consider all the factors (CAF) in which to cover on a subject which is deeply and broadly offered in 60 lessons; there were the positive, negative and interesting (PMI) issues that needed to be assessed from multiple viewpoints (OPV) and how they would influence my goal (AGO) for this material; and then what could be the outcome from this project (C&S).

The world is in a great degree of upheaval to its systems of social interaction and discourse. The thinking of our past will not be able to propel us into the new territory before us. We must demand better thinking of ourselves first before we expect it from those whom we believe will lead us. Only then will be able to clearly see from another viewpoint how a particular decision will impact our neighbor and us favorably or not, or even create a novel approach neither of us considered. As always, the choice is yours. However, "… what were you thinking?" takes on a whole new meaning.