



People in other countries, confronting problems similar to ours in the United States, are responding with approaches we may never have thought of.

Patterns of Thinking

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Eduard de Bono, an expert in creativity, says that the human brain can only deal with so much data at a time. It is constantly filtering out irrelevant information so that it can focus on what is important at the moment.

For example, he suggests to imagine yourself standing at the side of a road waiting for the opportunity to cross. Consider the enormous amount of data that you are receiving: the smell of a nearby barbecue, the wind blowing gently from your left, the varying shades of blue in the clear sky, the sounds of birds, children, cars, trucks and music.

Multiply these observations a thousandfold because when we “see” a car, our brain is actually perceiving thousands of tiny bits of information that allow us to discern shape, color, speed, etc. Had we never seen anything like a car before, we would need to study it, perhaps touch it, smell it and listen to it, to figure out what it was.

If we were to take in all these tiny pieces of data without the ability to organize it into useful patterns, we would never cross the street. By the time we had recognized a lull in the

traffic, so much time would have passed that it would once again be dangerous to cross.

According to de Bono, our brains develop patterns of thinking that help us disregard irrelevant information and focus instead on what is important at the time. We recognize the lull in traffic because our mind is not preoccupied with the hundreds of different hues of green in the trees across the street. In fact, if asked later, we may not even remember the trees.

De Bono argues that this selectivity is both the benefit of and the downside to patterns of thinking. Our brains ignore information determined to be irrelevant when, in fact, it may be highly relevant. When this happens, we need to be jarred out of our pattern of thinking so that we can create new patterns that include additional data.

So when we run into problems that require creative solutions, we are stumped. We can study the data over and over, but will not find a creative idea there. Creativity occurs when, by accident or design, we find ourselves confronting something outside of our pattern of thinking and recognize its importance to the problem at hand.

This is the “Eureka” moment of inspiration when we see something that had been there all along but was hidden by our pattern of thinking. At that point, logic helps us apply the inspiration to solve the problem. But, de Bono says, we should not conclude that logic led to the creative insight. Instead, logic helps us understand the creative insight.

The great value of becoming exposed to what other countries are doing in corrections is that we begin to appreciate the limits of our patterns of thinking, and (if we are fortunate) we begin to understand their patterns. This can open up new, creative possibilities.

Perhaps the classic example of this in the past 20 years has been the rise of restorative justice. Focusing on harm more than on law breaking, on cooperative problem-solving by victims and offenders more than on punishing offenders — these lie well outside conventional patterns of correctional practice.

But these are becoming a part of new patterns of thinking in Belgium, New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom, to mention a few examples.

So, enjoy this special issue of *Corrections Today* on international corrections. People in other countries, confronting problems similar to ours in the United States, are responding with approaches we may never have thought of. Perhaps they see something we are missing. Perhaps in considering what they do, we will see information we have always overlooked or failed to appreciate fully. ♦

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