

CONCEPTUAL THINKING (CT)

Conceptual Thinking is the ability to identify patterns or connections between situations that are not obviously related, and to identify key or underlying issues in complex situations. It includes using creative, conceptual or inductive reasoning.

<i>This Means...</i>	<i>This Doesn't Mean...</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • looking for the common factors in different situations and using/modifying previously successful approaches to meet the unique needs of the situation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “reinventing the wheel” with every situation and overlooking common sources of difficulty, to focus on the peculiarities of each situation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifying key factors in a complex problem, associating seemingly unrelated information in order to analyze a situation and simplify it for the eyes of others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • trying to position every complex detail for your audience without giving them the ‘big picture’
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • coming up with a new or different way of describing or explaining a situation or opportunity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using the same ideas or concepts to describe or explain a different situation or opportunity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • integrating and applying different ideas and approaches to accomplish a goal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • trying to force-fit standard approaches without considering alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • responding to changes or constraints by formulating new concepts or approaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assuming that changes or constraints are inevitable and that the department will adapt
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reflecting on past successes and failures to identify recurring trends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • missing the larger picture by focusing too much on case-by-case details

Developmental Activities

Level 1-2 Activities

Ask yourself how often you give yourself time to think about issues as opposed to just getting the job done?

- Give yourself the opportunity to think quietly.
- Talk to people about the issue.

- Look for people who regularly introduce new thoughts and concepts. Spend time with them talking about your issue.
- Look for ways in which your thinking relates to other issues.

Reflection Tip:

- * Reflect on the systems and processes in place within the organization that either support or hinder this type of activity.

Keep a log of situations at work for which you did not have a solution.

- Write down in detail the nature of the situation and your thoughts about it.
- Review the log; consider what you thought at the time, and what you think now as you reconsider the situation. What are the similarities and differences in your thought pattern?
- Write down alternative courses of action that could have benefited the situation.
- Make use of these actions in similar circumstances.

Reflection Tip:

- * Speak with your peers about similar situations that they have experienced and the actions they took.

Talk to others to get their ideas on issues, situations, problems, potential opportunities.

- Get another person's perspective.
- Think about how that perspective is similar and/or different from yours.
- Practice identifying the key themes which sum up your views on an issue and communicate them as simply and clearly as you can.
- Look for patterns in the two perspectives that generate a conclusion or third perspective on the issue.

Reflection Tip:

- * Talking through a problem or situation is a good technique to stimulating thought and developing insight. Getting another viewpoint adds more ideas and energy.

Develop your conceptual thinking with simple exercises and conceptually-oriented games.

- Pick a common item and identify 20 different uses for it (e.g., a fork, a drinking glass, a computer terminal).

- Consider any two unrelated items and create a list of reasons they are similar (e.g., a pen and a coffee cup, a telephone and an orange).
- Play games like Pictionary and Charades.

Reflection Tip:

* During these exercises, consider what patterns you are seeing or applying.

Find out how your role contributes to your team objectives and to the strategic direction of your branch.

- Meet with your manager and team members to discuss team and branch objectives.
- Spend a week gathering data, observing patterns, identifying gaps, and summarizing them.
- Summarize observations into a succinct presentation
- Try to apply these observations into your own way of setting objectives in your area of responsibility.

Level 3-4 Activities

Search for patterns or themes to a current problem before you draw conclusions or make a decision.

- Choose a challenging problem that you are currently facing and have not resolved.
- Brainstorm all the possible solutions that come to mind.
- Do not evaluate or critique any of the solutions or suggestions until you have exhausted all possible ideas.
- Assess the symptoms of the problem and see if you can identify common themes or root causes.
- Choose several solutions based on how well they address the root cause.
- Present your findings to key stakeholders, along with your proposed solutions.

Reflection Tip:

* Do you feel that these information gathering steps allowed you to generate a better quality solution? Reflect on the changes that you would make to this process the next time you used it.

During the next two weeks make a list of unexpected problems or issues that come up and think through the possible trends or patterns.

- Examine the list and try to identify any common themes or similarities, and ask yourself the following questions:

- Have I seen this type of problem before?
- What do I already know that may help me solve the problem?
- What may be the cause of the problem?
- Is there anything that could have prevented the problem from occurring? If yes, what action could have prevented it?
- Is there anything I could have done to speed up my understanding of the problem?
- Note these themes on a piece of paper.
- Take action to make use of these identified trends in order to overcome similar situations in the future.

Reflection Tip:

- * Try to expand the range of possibilities that you consider when you begin problem solving.

Build the requirement for more lateral thinking into your daily routine.

- Identify a set of criteria that all options must meet; for example, a set budget, a given timeline for commuting, a specific duration for an activity, etc.
- Now vary some of your regular activities. Keeping them within the criteria you have established. Identify different ways of getting to and from home, or a different place to have lunch every day for a week, or a different activity to entertain yourself or your family every weekend for a month.

Reflection Tip:

- * How did it feel to vary your regular activities?

Gather benchmark information about a current organizational problem.

- Work with your manager or peers to identify a problem which needs to be addressed within your area.
- Volunteer to work on developing a solution for the problem.
- Find out how others within and outside the Organization have dealt with similar problems or situations.
- Document your findings and share them with your manager and peers. These can include:
 - ⇒ Summarizing a new trend/technique and presenting it to others.
 - ⇒ Doing a competitive analysis.
 - ⇒ Studying history and drawing business parallels.
 - ⇒ Participating in a cross-functional project.

Reflection Tip:

- * Reflect on which of these alternatives would be most appropriate, considering the Organization's vision, values and current organizational strategy.

Level 5 Activities

Prepare a presentation on how a new product or service will address customer needs.

- Synthesize the related benefits into just four or five key points based on your conceptual thinking of the new product, the existing products and your customer's needs.
- Make the presentation to a group within your area or to your customer.

Reflection Tip:

- * The key to this exercise is to put some effort into boiling all of your information down into a concise message.

Identify a persistent problem that has resisted solution.

- Through discussion with appropriate management or staff, identify a persistent problem or limitation that has resisted resolution.
- Work on a plan that goes to the root of the problem or incorporates a different conceptual approach.
- Carefully think through the consequences of your plan or approach from the perspective of all stakeholders. Why will it succeed when the others have failed?
- Fine tune your plan or approach until you are confident that you have a feasible approach that will accomplish the objective and will add value.
- Present and review your plan with your manager and/or other stakeholders.

Reflection Tip:

- * How did you come up with the "different conceptual approach" in step 2? What did you learn from this process?

Develop alternative ways of looking at an issue.

- Select a business issue relevant to your area that you are genuinely interested in understanding or resolving. The problem should be of limited scope and you should be familiar with its past history (i.e., what had led up to the problem and previous attempts, if any, at resolving it).
- Describe the problem in a brief statement.

- ⇒ For example, you might state the problem as: “The staff turnover in my particular business unit has steadily increased over the past two year” or “Measures in customer satisfaction are not improving despite our new service programs”.
- Identify the key factors in the problem from your perspective.
 - ⇒ Pretend you are going to tell someone a story about the problem. What are the three or four key characteristics or details you would want to convey?
- Identify the key factors in the problem from the perspective of others. Ask yourself the following questions:
 - ⇒ How would management in other areas view this problem? What factors would they see from their perspective?
 - ⇒ How would customers view this problem? What factors would they see?
- Prepare a summary of your findings. Identify any immediate steps you could take on your own to help resolve the problem. Take the first steps.

Reflection Tip:

* Which “others” did you consider in this exercise? Are there any additional “others” that might have difference viewpoints that would be valuable to understand?

Incorporate several perspectives into your problem-solving approach.

- Identify those who are most affected by a problem.
- Ask them for information about the nature of the problem and for suggestions about possible solutions.
- Identify themes in the suggestions they've made.
- Try to picture what you are trying to achieve. How does it look? Is there anything you would like to change? What one thing would you like to change in that picture?
- Think about what situation this particular problem reminds you of. Are there any interesting similarities or differences between the current and past situations? What can you learn from them?
- Imagine that you have no constraints to solve this issue or problem – what would you do? Why would you do it? What prevents you from acting on the thoughts you have?
- Talk to people who are not familiar with the issue you are grappling with. This may include those from totally different areas of expertise or disciplines that you are used to – what kinds of things do people come up with?
- Take the results of these approaches and try to come up with some novel solutions to your problem.
- Bounce your ideas off your manager or trusted colleagues.
- Try to learn from and incorporate the comments you have collected.

Reflection Tip:

* Reflect on the steps you took to integrate the various pieces of information you gathered. Would this process be valuable at another time?

Look at how technologies are being applied in different industries and determine how the underlying concepts could be applied in your organization.

- Investigate how technology is providing solutions internally and externally in a variety of industries (e.g., finance, banking, communications etc.).
- Identify the underlying themes or patterns to which those solutions speak.
- Think about how you could take these underlying themes or patterns to enhance the technological applications within your organization and develop a supporting business case or strategy paper.
- Present and review your concepts with senior management.