

STYLES OF THINKING: EXPANDING YOUR REPERTOIRE

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You are likely to have preferred ways of thinking that reflect your education, experience, skills, temperament, intellect, personality, culture --- and even genetic predispositions. Other influences are time, pressure and context. All of these internal and external variables also affect your interpretation of situations and information as well as behavior. One way to expand your options is to use a range of thinking tendencies or styles, to go beyond what's comfortable and already known.

Use this handout to identify your thinking style preferences, expand your range and understand others' tendencies. This process will add new strengths, enhance your life and work and enrich professional and personal relationships.

According to research, the least frequently used style of thinking is synthesis (11% of the population). Effective for integrating information, ideas and emotion or combining "separate elements or substances to form a coherent whole," synthesis gets you out of silos or narrow categories. Use this style to make sense of complexity such as how to express and integrate a range of strengths and interests. The results could also help others understand what you offer.

To go beyond this introduction to styles, you may want to at least skim *The Art of Thinking* by Allen F. Harrison and Robert M. Bramson. The authors identify five types of thinkers. Use or adapt their descriptions to note the styles you and others use; consider what you want to learn and practice. Knowing the advantages and disadvantages of each one will also help you work and communicate more effectively with others.

The five types of thinkers are:

Synthesists: This least frequently used style is used to "make something new and original out of things that, by themselves, seem very different from one another." The approach works well as a better, original fit for modern times rather than just a compromise or consensus. The natural question of synthesizers is "What if...?" They are comfortable with conflict and recognize that facts can be determined and interpreted differently.

Idealists: They take a broad view of things. A future orientation is natural. Interested in social values, they tend to ask, "Where are we going and why?"

Pragmatists: The motto for them is "Whatever works." Immediate personal experience is important, as is experimentation and innovation.

Analysts: These thinkers pay relatively greater attention to detail and approach

problems in careful, logical ways. They plan and like to gather as much information as possible before acting.

Realists: Somewhat similar to pragmatists, they seek what is palpable, what can be experienced through the senses. Agreement and consensus, based on shared observation, is preferred. They are interested in correcting things.

Ways to improve your ability to synthesize:

Use dialectical thinking. Instead of flying straight as an arrow to what seems appropriate, logical, possible, known or pre-determined, try the following approach:

- Specify what is known already.
- Consider and explore what is new, different, or unfamiliar.
- Pull out similarities from things that don't seem alike.
- Integrate what is known with the new, different or unfamiliar.

Practice getting comfortable with respectful, frank confrontation, argument and saying what you truly think. Disagreement can lead to creative outcomes when entered into with a spirit of listening and learning. Pay attention to emotions as well as information for clues.

Accept that you may not have all or better answers. Appearing overly confident or the fount of knowledge is unlikely to result in the best outcome. Ask open-ended questions starting with *what* and *how* until you and others see the full picture and can use it for discussion, choice, and action. Explore thinking against yourself, questioning your assumptions. Search behind what seems to be others' eccentricity.

Observe from the sidelines or act as though you were a third-party such as a judge, arbitrator, mediator, or therapist. Don't be surprised if you are rejected or become temporarily unpopular when you are frank. In fact, such reactions may give you a sense of other issues to address or let go.

Appreciate ambiguity. Practice holding seemingly opposing thoughts concurrently. Resolution may come intuitively or emerge from the conflict. By its nature, expect some confusion in pursuing this path to better results that reflect reality, seeming contradictions and complexity of life for now and later.

In sum, learning to synthesize can be challenging and stimulating. It involves taking reasonable risks with ideas and people. But the results are often rich, beneficial and inspiring. Ultimately, using this process of thinking usually results in outcomes that honor your true needs, depth, and breadth. You may also save time and possibly money.

Identify briefly below two opportunities or situations in which you can practice your synthesizing skills:

Who can help you?

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