

Edward de Bono

PO

Beyond Yes & No

Penguin Books

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Preface to the Pelican Edition

This book was first published in the United States and that is why the style is perhaps more crisp and forthright than might otherwise have been the case. Some readers might be upset by this and might feel that a more gently persuasive manner with much qualification and scholarly reference would be more suitable for such a fundamental subject. They may be right, and I did consider completely re-writing the book in that way, rather than making only the adaptations necessary for the English reader, but in the end decided that if something was worth saying it was worth saying in as direct and simple a manner as possible. In any case the notion of PO is likely to upset many people however it is presented. If it did not have this effect it would probably not be worth presenting.

Those readers who are already familiar with my work on the treatment of thinking as a skill and also on lateral thinking will already have a natural framework into which to fit the book. They will find that PO crystallizes the amorphous attitudes and particular processes of lateral thinking into a symbol that can be used directly as a tool. Those readers who have not yet read any of my other books will find that PO can stand on its own, but they may want to read between the lines to find out what lies behind the starkness of PO.

Our traditional YES/NO thinking system is immensely effective in the second stage of thinking: that is in making the best use of fixed ideas. Unfortunately the system is not much use in the first stage of thinking: that is the perception stage which involves creating new ideas and new ways of looking at things.

thinking and the PO system. This is because more than anyone else they see the need for the PO system. They are well aware of the elusive quality of creativity and the need for creative tools. They recognize that you cannot be creative just by willing it. They recognize above all the sheer impossibility of getting other people to be creative through exhortation. Such creative people have felt all along that creativity is based on a system that is very different from the YES/NO system, and that is why they appreciate the PO system. Not surprisingly, it is the uncreative people or pseudo-creative people who feel that they can be creative within the YES/NO system and have no need for PO.

Contrast YES/NO and PO

towel and jelly

The YES/NO system is based on the towel type of information surface. Ideas are discrete and fixed, and an outside processor selects them and puts them together. The PO system is based on the jelly surface on which the information arranges itself into patterns.

first and second stage

The YES/NO system is used in the second, or processing, stage of thinking. It gets to work on the concept package of accepted ideas and processes these to give an answer. The PO system is used in the first stage, or perception stage, of thinking. It is used to move laterally from one way of looking at things to another. You use the YES/NO system after you have accepted fixed concepts and the PO system before you have found new ones.

judgement and change

The YES/NO system is a judgement system. With it you judge whether an idea fits the existing pattern of experience or not. In this way the YES/NO system acts to preserve existing patterns.

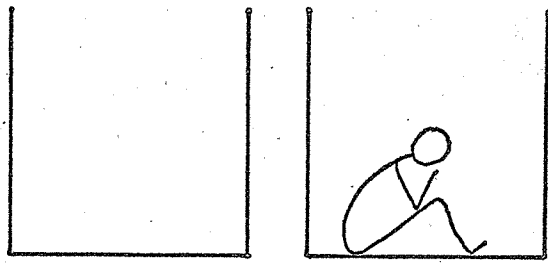
The PO system is never a judgement system but is always a change system. With it you move away from old ideas to try and find new ones. Instead of preserving existing patterns the PO system explores and creates new ones.

pigeonholes

The YES/NO system with its definite judgements sets up classifications and categories. Much use is made of fixed pigeonholes and definitions. In the YES/NO system a definition is a sort of box, and something is judged as being completely in that box or completely outside it. The PO system seeks to break down the rigidities of classifications and categories in order to look at things in different ways. In the PO system you do not use pigeonholes or boxes for definitions. Instead you use flagpoles. This is suggested in Figure 4. The upper part of the figure shows the usual box-type definition, and someone is judged as being either a friend or an enemy. In the bottom half of the figure is shown the flagpole type of definition. Here someone is nearer one pole than the other but can still be seen as related to the other pole if you choose to look at things in that way. In the YES/NO system a person must be either all friend or all enemy in the usual type of polarization, but in the PO system a person may be either without any difficulty. Thus the YES/NO system creates polarizations, but the PO system breaks them down.

single or many

The YES/NO system is worked hard in order to find the best answer. This answer is the one that is nearest to being absolutely right. Therefore any other different answers must be inferior and any contradictory answers must be wrong. In the PO system there may be many different answers all of which have their own validity.



FRIEND

ENEMY

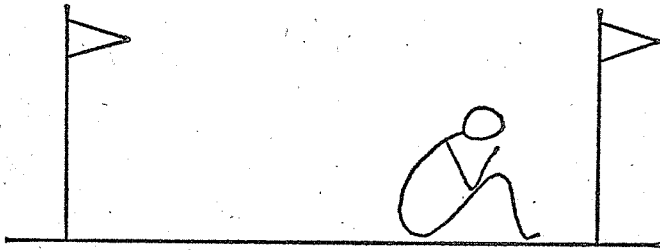


Figure 4

fundamental difference

There are many fundamental points of difference in the way the two systems operate. The two most extreme points of difference are:

1. In the YES/NO system you must be right at each step, but in the PO system being right is not important.
2. In the YES/NO system you consider only what is related to the situation, but in the PO system you can bring in random material from outside.

being right

The very essence of logical thinking is that you must be right at each step. But in the PO system you may be quite wrong at some step on the way to finding a new and effective idea. This involves the use of an 'intermediate impossible', which is a wrong idea used as a stepping-stone. The process is described later on.

random material

In the YES/NO system you concentrate on what is relevant to the situation, since you are trying to analyse the situation. But in the PO system you can bring in random material from outside and juxtapose it with the situation to see what ideas develop. This process is also described later on.

relationship of PO to the YES/NO system

Although the PO system and the YES/NO system are used in different stages of thinking, there are times when PO is used directly to counter the effects of the YES/NO system. These occasions are as follows:

1. PO is used to protect an idea from the sharp judgement of the YES/NO system so that it can act as a stepping-stone to further ideas.
2. PO is used to challenge YES/NO judgements and classifications that have been made in the past.
3. PO is used as a by-pass to ask for different ways of looking at things without having to reject the current way first.

mixture

In practice the use of the PO system is mixed in with the use of the YES/NO system. The PO system provides the creative element.

**Edward de Bono: * 1933, Malta: “Lateral Thinking” – also called “Po”
physician, psychologist, philosopher, author, inventor and [consultant](#).**

Po is a word that precedes and signals a provocation. A provocation is an idea which moves thinking forward to a new place from where new ideas or solutions may be found.

The term po was created by [Edward de Bono](#) as part of a [lateral thinking](#) technique to suggest forward movement, that is, making a statement and seeing where it leads to. It is an extraction from words such as [hypothesis](#), [suppose](#), [possible](#) and [poetry](#), all of which indicate forward movement and contain the syllable "po." Po can be taken to refer to any of the following: **provoking operation**, **provocative operation** or **provocation operation**.

Also, in ancient [Polynesian](#) and the [Maori](#), the word "po" refers to the original chaotic state of formlessness, from which evolution occurred. Edward de Bono argues that this context as well applies to the term.

For example, *Sales are dropping off because our product is perceived as old fashioned.*

1. po: Change the colour of the packaging
2. po: [Flood the market](#) with even older-looking products to make it seem more appealing
3. po: Call it [retro](#)
4. po: Sell it to old people
5. po: Sell it to young people as a gift for old people
6. po: Open a [museum](#) dedicated to it
7. po: Market it as a new product

The point of these examples is that an initial po may seem silly, but a further development may seem very good indeed. The intermediate silly idea is a necessary step to find the good idea. If silly ideas are not allowed to form, the subsequent good idea will be undiscovered. Po allows silly ideas to form so that good ones can follow.

Po is also an interjection - consider as an alternative to yes or no. Indicating that you need to know more before answering an expression of an idea or thought. Imagine it as a word that means: "I think I know what you mean, but can you say it in another way so I may more fully understand you". Its use indicates respect for the other, It is considered a language laxative - to encourage more conversation. and explanation.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Po_\(lateral_thinking\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Po_(lateral_thinking))