

Creativity Tool: Provoking Mental Leaps

When trying to solve a problem, it's often easy to get "stuck", a phenomenon called "psychological inertia" – or the tendency to think the way we have always thought. Creativity experts have used the metaphor of a river in describing these well-worn mental paths, saying that they are like river valleys, where the river seeks the lowest place to flow, only in this case we follow "mental valleys." And as is the case with river valleys, it takes enormous energy to divert the stream in a new direction. This is where Provocation comes in. The process starts with a Provocation – an outrageous statement that forces a mental leap.

Creativity expert Edward de Bono called this approach a *provocative operation* (abbreviated "PO")*. He gives the example of a group trying to solve the problem of making space for parking cars in a congested downtown area. He famously used the provocation, "PO cars don't need parking spaces!" The group then began to explore how this might be true. The result was invention of a mechanical storage rack for lifting cars and stacking them vertically in steel compartments.

Steps for Provoking Mental Leaps

The following are a set of steps that will help in using this method.

- 1) **State the problem or challenge** – Be specific about the current situation and the objective that you are trying to achieve.
- 2) **List five or six key requirements in the present situation** – These could be service features, customer requirements, situation constraints, or other assumed components of the problem.
- 3) **Formulate a provocation** – Something that is absurd, illogical, or in some way departs from the accepted description of the current reality. Provocations will typically fall one of three types –
 - Negation or Reversal – Denies the current situation ("No waiting rooms!") or reverses the typical statement (instead of "Every hospital contains a waiting room", try "Every waiting room contains a hospital")
 - Exaggeration – Magnifies or minimizes the current reality (Waiting time is zero!)
 - Dream – Imagines reality would be different if only.... (What if patients were treated before they came to the hospital?)
- 4) **Generate ideas from the psychological movement fostered by the provocation** – Visualize what would happen if the provocation were put into effect and note down your ideas. Then do the following:
 - Extract the **core concept** behind the provocation and its implication for your problem (For example, "situation prevents any delay in treatment")
 - List differences between provocation and current reality
 - Review and prioritize ideas

Tip: Remember that each provocation should be followed by attempts ("provocative operations") to identify ways to achieve the radical, provocative idea.

*De Bono, Edward (1985) *de Bono's Thinking Course*, New York: Facts on File.