



# Management: thinking creatively to solve problems

## 10.1 Introduction

This section of the course is about practitioners, doing their job and managing themselves. (We will use the term ‘you’ as the practitioner, but are fully aware that you might be working at a head office, or taking this course out of interest. Nevertheless, we recommend that you put yourself in the practitioner’s shoes when reading this section.)

As a practitioner, you should understand that it is not about how you manage people, or the routine management of operational logistics, or essential administrative tasks. It is about making decisions, solving problems and negotiating policies and agreements in order to get things done. This is the third building block of intervention, after development and power. In order to carry out your role, you will need to think creatively and recognise how different perceptions and multiple realities affect the way other people think and behave. It is also about learning and adaptation, which are key skills if one is to handle uncertainty and ambiguity. You will need to do all these things in order to work effectively in a constantly changing environment.

The focus of this section is on the complicated and sometimes difficult business of working with people from your own and other organisations who, like you, have their own agendas to work to and difficult and often complex tasks to carry out. Military forces, UN agencies and non-government organisations have very different decision-making structures and operating procedures, and often have different short-term goals as well. Yet peacebuilding requires some degree of coordination and cooperation.

It is all too easy to focus on the tasks at hand and their urgency, whether distributing food aid or policing the streets, and overlook or even neglect the needs and sensibilities of others. Differing aspirations and differing approaches – such as the balance between easing immediate suffering and building a lasting peace – can provoke disagreement and disharmony which can interrupt activities and sour relationships between people and agencies. Unproductive arguments between different groups of peacemakers or aid workers, with angry and often public disputes, have often caused serious disruptions. It is essential to negotiate and cooperate with a wide range of people with widely different approaches and attitudes, and understand that they may find your approach and priorities strange or alien.

Intervening organisations often operate at multinational, national, regional and local levels. You and others have complex and sometimes difficult

choices to make in interpreting policies and practices devised at one level but delivered at another. You may find yourself disagreeing with the line from headquarters. In Section 4.2 of this Study Guide we looked at the debate about early elections, which you know are contested. Suppose you are working in the field and have been told by headquarters that elections must be carried out within six months, but, in your view as the person on the spot, you feel the country is not yet ready for them? How do you reconcile your views on the situation and the needs of local people with the requirements of such a policy and negotiate a way forward?

Differences between and within organisations are compounded by rapidly changing context:

- Change on the ground may be very rapid. Staff at headquarters may be far removed from day-to-day events and be unaware of daily fluctuations.
- Your perceptions of the situation may change. The longer you are in post, the better you understand the situation. Your assessment of things may change rapidly as events move on. Early decisions may not seem so wise.
- Other agencies and individuals are also changing as they learn and encounter new experiences – so what they said last week may no longer be their policy.

Everything may be in flux. You will need to adapt your responses and reactions to situations accordingly. You need to be able to think effectively as you go, though time for reflection may be a luxury. How does one act in difficult and complex situations when, for example, there may be the possibility that your actions could cause harm to the local community or alienate a particular identity group?

It is against such a changing background that you need to operate effectively on a daily basis reconciling needs on the ground with personal, team and head office requirements. In such a context, decision making, reaching agreements and problem solving are everyday activities. They are all part of a complex web of activities that are closely intertwined and so interlinked that it is not possible to describe where one activity ends and another begins. Negotiating a new agreement may involve thinking creatively, using your negotiating skills, and taking decisions too.

You will have to do all of these things at once. But for our convenience only, we have pulled them apart so that each of these skills is addressed in a separate section:

- Creative thinking, perception and multiple realities.
- Decision making and problem solving.
- Negotiation and interpersonal confrontations.

It is especially important to learn from mistakes – if we suppress them or hide them away, we or others will make the same mistakes again. This section emphasises analysing, reflecting on, and possibly correcting past decisions.

A standard management textbook will provide you with the theoretical underpinnings of the topics addressed in this part of the course and will also prove useful practical examples. But working in and on war brings special pressures and difficulties, which such a textbook would not address. The context in which you operate may be extremely difficult and volatile. The dynamics of decision making are exceptionally diverse and complicated and have to take into account a complex range of political, economic and social consequences. Here, we have drawn on some management theory and practice but have sought to embed it in the context of working ‘in’ and ‘on’ war. The aim of this section is to help you develop a better understanding of what is happening around you and to improve your thinking and problem-solving skills. It also aims to provide you with an opportunity to reflect on and enhance your own abilities and skills so that you can have a better understanding of how to handle interpersonal confrontations and negotiations, and recognise the value and contribution of learning and adaptation skills.

## **10.2 Broader thinking and other views**

What should you do when the obvious answers, the logical answers, the traditional answers don’t work – when they don’t solve the problem or you cannot get agreement from others? You need to find new answers or ways forward you had not considered. This is called ‘creative thinking’ or ‘thinking outside the box’. It is essential in conditions of change and great uncertainty, and can prove invaluable in difficult situations that have never been encountered before. You saw in Section 5 of the Study Guide how easy it is to make assumptions which then turn out to be only partly true or even invalid. You cannot rely on past experience or simple assumptions. Creative thinking can help uncover possible ways forward when other more traditional techniques grind to a halt and issues seem intractable.

We will introduce three widely used concepts. ‘Brainstorming’ and ‘lateral thinking’ are ways of finding new approaches which challenge long-held or commonplace assumptions. After you build up a list of truly different

alternatives, you can then use traditional, logical thinking and analytical approaches to evaluate these ideas carefully. 'Logic bubbles' is the third concept, and it is about the logical thinking carried out by ourselves and others, and how this might limit creative thinking.

### **10.2.1 Brainstorming**

Brainstorming is one of the best known creative thinking techniques and can be particularly effective in a group. It is especially valuable in discouraging premature judgements and countering any tendency to go for one or two tried and tested options. In a brainstorming session members of the group are encouraged to suggest as many different solutions to the problem as possible; ideas should be crazy or wild and there is no discussion of specific ideas until later in the session. During the first phase of brainstorming session:

- Have a well-defined and clearly stated problem.
- Have someone write down all the ideas as they occur.
- Every idea is accepted and recorded; suspend judgement.
- Encourage people to build on the ideas of others.
- Encourage 'way-out' and odd ideas.

Only when the group agrees it has exhausted all the possibilities, does it then begin to sift through and evaluate the suggestions. Don't reject wilder ideas out of hand, because sometimes they trigger more realistic options.

The two biggest failures in brainstorming are that all too often people feel constrained by their environment or embarrassed to make off-the-wall suggestions. And they will begin to evaluate each other's ideas too quickly, before all possible suggestions have been made.

### **10.2.2 Lateral vs. vertical thinking**

Traditional thinking is logical and 'vertical'; it proceeds along a straight path from one point to another, argues Edward de Bono (1992). He coined the term 'lateral thinking' for moving outwards and sideways looking for alternatives.

Traditional, rationalist thinking seeks to judge, to prove and establish points or relationships. Lateral thinking aims to find new ways of looking at things in the pursuit of fresh ideas. Vertical thinking looks for answers, whereas lateral thinking looks for questions.

De Bono stresses: ask the wrong questions and you will get the wrong answers. One has to be clear about the nature of the problem or the issue. Lateral thinking, in effect, forces you to ask how sure you are that you have understood the nature of the problem. Are the concepts which you are working with open to other interpretations? Use lateral thinking to test your notions about a problem and to see if there are different questions to be answered and other possible interpretations available.

Traditional vertical thinking is biased towards the yes–no system; it proceeds from one point to another in a logical way and seeks to exclude ideas or possibilities in its quest for the right answer. Lateral thinking does not use the yes–no system. It does not seek to exclude possibilities at an early stage. It seeks to work with an idea, to explore its possibilities, to jump from one idea to another. By jumping from one idea to another in a completely illogical way new patterns of thinking may be opened up and may bring with them fresh approaches to problems. Lateral thinking approaches will help in improving one’s perceptions and the discovery of multiple realities.

In practice you should use lateral thinking and vertical thinking together, alternating between one and the other. Lateral thinking will help you to come up with an idea or a solution and vertical thinking will help you to analyse and develop it. When you find a well-established way of doing things is no longer helpful then lateral thinking may throw up new approaches that can be built upon.

Lateral thinking is particularly important in trying to collaborate with others in peacebuilding. If you and your potential partner seem to have contradictory plans, lateral thinking may help you discover an alternative way forward that satisfies you both. As our first scenario shows, it may be about changing the question.