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Thinking out of the box

Apparently it is all Aristotle's fault. We are constrained by his rigid "box thinking". You are either in the box or not, there is no half-way house, or room for uncertainty or fuzziness.

According to the great lateral thinker, Edward de Bono, such an approach may be logical and practical but it is inadequate and dangerous in the present age.

"Our traditional thinking methods have not changed for centuries," he says. "While these methods were powerful in dealing with a relatively stable world (where ideas and concepts tended to live longer than people), they are no longer adequate to deal with the rapidly changing world of today where new concepts and ideas are urgently needed."

We are, says de Bono, obsessed with problem solving, whereas we should be looking for what can be done better, searching not for what is wrong but what can be got right, building creatively on others' innovation and not trying to knock it down.

Right or wrong, de Bono challenges us to think differently. If we wish to find innovative solutions that will address the really difficult local, national and global issues, we need to test our assumptions, expand our repertoires and, like some of the best musicians, improvise. We may need to take a risk... or several.

We can start by acknowledging our own ignorance and not pretend that we have all the answers. As Einstein said: "Do not worry about your difficulties with mathematics. I can assure you mine are still greater."

We need to accept that it's not all about knowledge. Imagination is critical. But our education system may work against us.

"It is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education," thought Einstein. For him "the important thing is not to stop questioning".

To transcend our culture of right/wrong or win/lose, perhaps we too need to keep asking questions and use the inspiration of de Bono and Einstein to build a truly collaborative approach in business, politics and the professions.

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