

# Thinking about Thinking I

A "Meta" Analysis of  
Joel Barker and Edward de Bono  
Thinking Skills Programs



*The quality of our  
thinking will determine  
the quality of our  
future.*

Edward de Bono

*"No one will thank you for  
taking care of the present if you  
have neglected the future."*

Joel Barker

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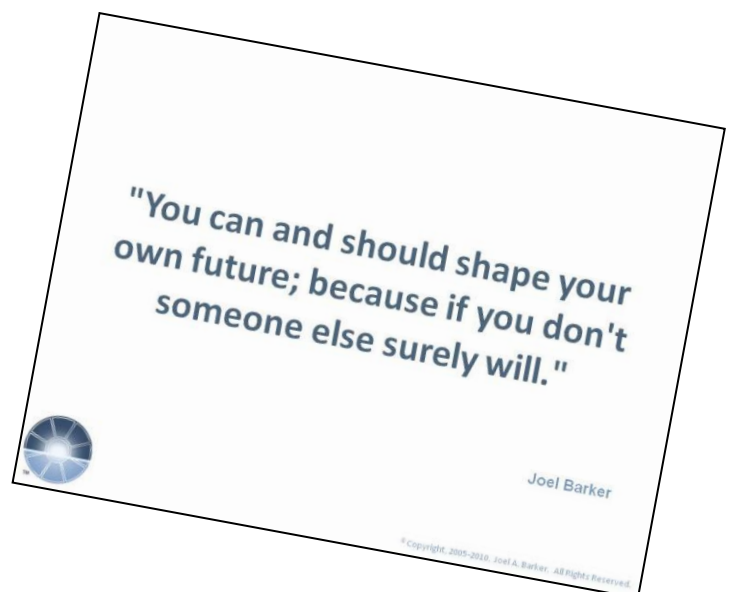
## Executive Summary

In the world of “thinking skills,” Edward de Bono’s **Six Thinking Hats**®, **Lateral Thinking**®, and **Direct Attention Thinking Tools**® (recently renamed as “**The Power of Perception**™”) and Joel Barker’s **Implications Wheel**® and **Strategy Matrix**® offer tools and training that promise to improve the “quality of our thinking” (de Bono). These tools have had broad application in organizations, business settings, profit and non-profit, education, and government.

In the following sections, these tools are briefly explained – and compared. The analysis shows that while the tools have been “applied” in different ways, they are similar in many specific features and underlying concepts. And most importantly, there are **completely consistent in concept**. There’s a very important similarity in that both of these author’s success comes from the inclusion of key underlying concepts:

- **Focus** – a strong emphasis on clearly defining the issue.
- **Time** – using time and time limits to make the process efficient.
- **Rules** – working the process in game-like fashion that both enhances the quality of the process and engages participants in a willingness to “play the game.”

Equally significant is that the thinking tools from both de Bono and Barker clearly focus on providing improved information for making better decisions – not making decisions. **Six Thinking Hats** concludes with “are you ready to decide?” The **Implications Wheel** leads to “decision-enhancing” information for leadership.



## Background

In the world of “thinking skills,” Edward de Bono’s **Six Thinking Hats**®, **Lateral Thinking**®, and **Direct Attention Thinking Tools**® (recently renamed as “The Power of Perception™”) and Joel Barker’s **Implications Wheel**® and **Strategy Matrix**® offer tools and training that promise to improve the “quality of our thinking” (de Bono). These tools have had broad application in organizations, business settings, profit and non-profit, education, and government.

Each of these authors represent themselves in different ways and while both have been prolific in their work, that too has been significantly different in some ways.

Edward de Bono has authored dozens of books and while they cover a wide range of thinking skills, he is primarily associated with creative thinking.

Joel Barker is widely known for his videos which cover a wider range of subjects, from thinking skills, to diversity, to leadership, to innovation. He is primarily known for his “paradigm” work.

Interestingly both Barker and de Bono have made significant applications of their work to both education and a wide range of social issues throughout the world.

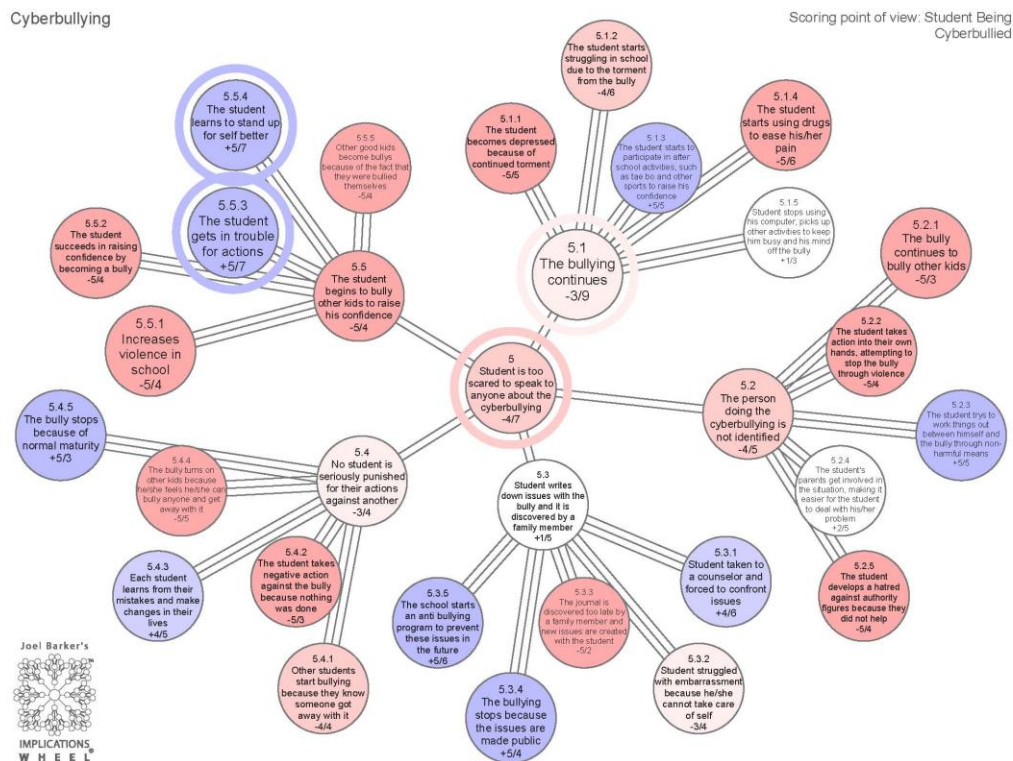
In this analysis, however, the focus is on the programs that have been created for delivery in organizations by individuals trained in the de Bono and Barker methods.

**Note:** *Each of these authors have additional “thinking tools” that are not directly included in this analysis. Many of the key characteristics of the tools identified here are also present in the other tools.*

# Joel Barker's Strategic Exploration Tools

Joel Barker's **Implication Wheel**® is a powerful pre-strategic planning tool that can be used to explore a number of issues, trends, or proposed changes. In today's world, almost every day we hear about the "unintended consequences" of a decision or program. In a Wall Street Journal article, a reported "unintended consequence" of adding freight cars to AMTRAK passenger trains was the inability of trains to fit into station platforms for proper loading/unloading of passengers. Is this really an "unintended consequence" or is it more accurately labeled, as Joel Barker says, an "unanticipated consequence." And wouldn't individuals and organizations make far better decisions if they realized just "what the heck we are getting ourselves into?"

The **Implications Wheel**® works by carefully defining "the center," the issue, proposed change, or trend to be examined. The question asked is "What are the possible implications of...?" What will happen next if this trend continues, if this policy is implemented? The process then works by identifying both positive and negative implications for each item identified. Operating in a team or an online individual mode, explorations identify a wealth of valuable information in two - three hours, exploring "first-order" implications, followed by what happens next (2<sup>nd</sup> order implications) and again what happens next (3<sup>rd</sup> order implications).



Joel Barker's **Strategy Matrix**<sup>®</sup> is also a pre-strategic planning tool that can be used in a variety of ways to assess the impact of issues, trends, or potential changes on an organization's strategic objectives and key characteristics. If individuals, teams, and entire organizations want to make better decisions, the **Strategy Matrix**<sup>®</sup> helps by generating extremely effective investigations of the short term and long term impact of specific elements on an organization. It helps groups effectively and efficiently process a large amount of information in a short time. The **Strategy Matrix**<sup>®</sup> is an excellent tool for promoting open discussion of critical issues for an organization.

The **Strategy Matrix**<sup>®</sup> works by carefully defining your organization's key strategic objectives and characteristics. The key characteristics are "descriptors of the organization that are essential to define its personality." It evaluates elements that, if removed, would fundamentally change the organization. Then, the row items are entered into the matrix, based on pre-work when the issues to be examined are known and/or from input of the participants on issues that need to be examined. The items to be explored might include emerging trends, innovations, policy changes, new strategic objectives – or anything else that may have an impact on the organization. These row items are then scored based on potential impact on the strategic objectives and key characteristics, in a short-term and long-term time frame.

### S.W.O.T. Analysis - Total Quality Locomotives

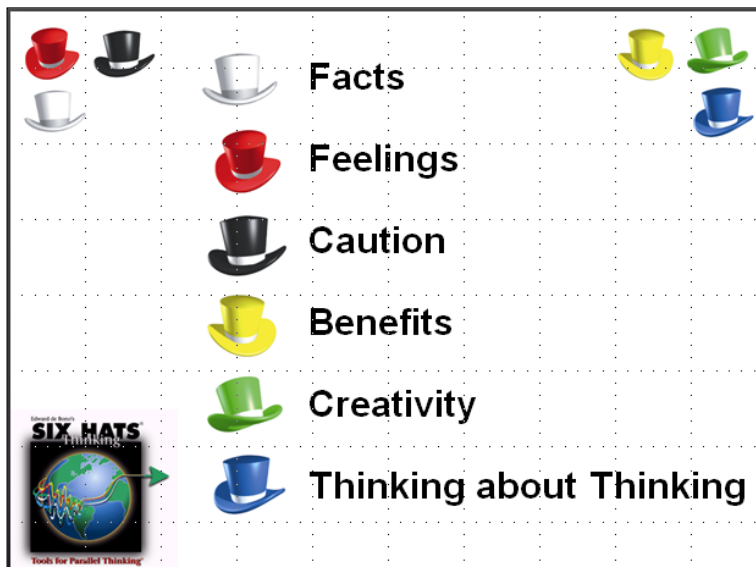
Selected Rows Only

Significance Factor	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	Row Totals
1 - [Strength] Reputation in community	+1	+1	-1	+1	0	0	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+25
2 - [Strength] Product reputation	+1	+1	-1	0	0	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+21
3 - [Strength] Support from CEO	+1	+1	0	0	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+19
7 - [Weakness] Budget limitations	-1	-1	+1	0	0	-1	-1	0	0	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-17
8 - [Weakness] Inexperienced HR staff	-1	-1	0	0	-1	-1	0	0	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-15
9 - [Weakness] Current salary levels below community average	-1	-1	+1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-15
13 - [Opportunity] Increased number of training programs available	+1	0	0	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+17
14 - [Opportunity] Growth of online learning resources	+1	0	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+17
15 - [Opportunity] Company announcement of online store	+1	+1	-1	0	0	0	+1	0	0	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+15
19 - [Threat] Sexual harassment situation	-1	-1	-1	+1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-17
20 - [Threat] Cost of compliance with new regulations	0	-1	-1	0	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-15
21 - [Threat] Well funded competitor in community	-1	-1	-1	0	-1	0	-1	0	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-17
Column Totals	+16	+8	+18	+5	+13	+13	+23	+1	+5	+11	+11	+11	+11	+11	+11	+17

## Edward de Bono's Thinking Tools

**Six Thinking Hats®** is based on Edward de Bono's view that we have developed many good tools for argument and analysis, but few tools that deal with ordinary everyday thinking. The **Six Thinking Hats®** system is designed to separate our thinking, make it easier to switch and signal our thinking, and separate the ego that is too often involved in discussions from the performance desired.

- **Replace One-Dimensional Thinking with Six-Dimensional Thinking**
  - The power of the White, Red, Black, Yellow, Green, and Blue Hats.
- **Reduce Meeting Time**
  - Powerful templates for analyzing, planning, and improving meeting effectiveness.
- **Improve Decision-Making**
  - Six Thinking Hats encourages the cooperative exploration of ideas and subjects.
- **Create a Micro-Culture for Creativity**
  - Enhance creative efforts by focusing attention and using the tools of Lateral Thinking.
- **Increase Teamwork and Collaboration**
  - Reduce adversarial thinking and encourage thinking together.

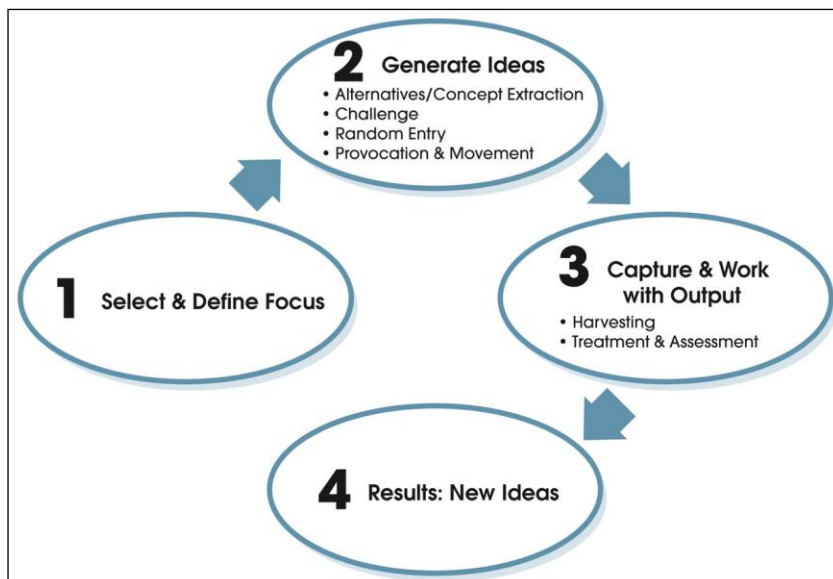


**Lateral Thinking®** is a way of thinking which seeks changes in perceptions, concepts, and ideas using formal thinking tools. It is designed to be used:

1. To solve problems that face us that we cannot otherwise solve.
2. To create more innovative organization. If we are not innovative, we will not survive.
3. To fully utilize the assets we already have – the assets of our employees.

Edward de Bono is considered the world’s leading authority on creative thinking. He believes, based on how the brain organizes information, that we need to think creatively to break out of routine patterns and think “laterally.”

- **Creative Results Require Serious Creativity**
  - Creativity is not just “thinking outside the box” or “letting go.”
- **Creativity Empowered by Lateral Thinking Tools**
  - Powerful tools for identifying alternatives, using provocation, and random words.
- **What Happens Next**
  - Making creative ideas happen through Treatment and Harvesting.
- **Develop a Creative Hit List**
  - Targeted creative efforts for individuals, departments, and organizations.



Edward de Bono's **Direct Attention Thinking Tools**® (recently rebranded as "The Power of Perception™") are "attention-directing tools." The **DATT** program introduces ten explicit thinking tools that can be learned, practiced, and applied in a deliberate fashion.

- Carefully designed to carry out a specific function.
- Learn the tools one by one.
- No fixed sequence in which to use the tools.
- Practice is needed to become skilled.
- Skill of the user combined with the design of the tool that gives the desired result.
- Three Keys to Success
  - Focus
  - Objectivity
  - Comprehensiveness

It is the **DATT** tools where we find the strongest direct similarity in the "purpose" of the thinking tools. As this comparison will make clear, the concepts underlying all of the de Bono and Barker tools are very similar. In the **DATT** tool kit there is one tool, **Consequence and Sequel**, which is very similar in purpose to the Implications Wheel®. However, while there is a similarity of purpose, there are major differences in the way these two tools are implemented. "Consequence and Sequel" is designed to be a quick evaluation tool looking at (in Implications Wheel® terms) "first order" consequences. In terms of similarity, the logic behind the two techniques is clear. In teaching **DATT**, some key points are made:

- Everything we do and every change we make has consequences.
- Even doing nothing has consequences.
- All of our living is going to take place in the future, so looking ahead is an extremely important part of thinking.

### **Note: Perception and Paradigms**

In **DATT**, there is also a close parallel in de Bono's thinking on "perception" and Barker's thinking on "paradigms." In **DATT**, de Bono talks about perception as being one of the most important parts of thinking and something that shows we can all look at the same thing and yet perceive it differently. And de Bono believes that "most of the mistakes and inadequacies in our thinking are in the area of perception."



## The Comparisons

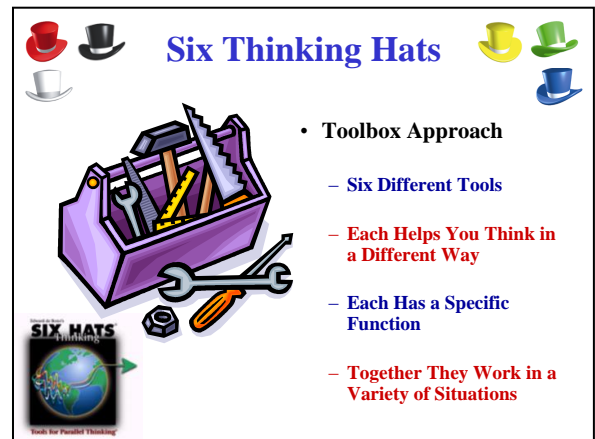
There are several ways of looking at the “tools” offered by de Bono and Barker. Both promote a “toolbox” approach. But even in a toolbox there are general purpose tools, i.e., a hammer or a screwdriver, and there are very specific, more narrow focused tools, i.e., a spark plug socket or bicycle spoke wrench. The tools are clearly defined by purpose, application, and concepts.

One of the techniques that de Bono uses in Lateral Thinking® is determining “focus.” Are you just looking for some creative ideas on “customer service,” which would be a general “area focus?” Or are you looking for some creative ideas for “reducing customer complaints,” which would be a purpose focus?

Joel Barker’s tools have very specific “purposes” attached to them – they are looking in a direction. Defining the “center” for an Implications Wheel® would be a clear parallel to a “purpose focus” and perhaps depending on a specific topic, might also parallel on more general “area focus.”

Edward de Bono’s tools can be used with an established direction but they are conceptually at a more fundamental “all purpose” tool level.

An interesting note, if this is true, would be that some of de Bono’s all purpose tools might work to enhance some of the Barker applications. In turn, Barker’s Implications Wheel® could be seen as an enhancement to some of de Bono’s applications. I will return to this point later with a specific example.



## Certification – Learning the Techniques

The process of learning, getting certified, and applying these tools has been a rewarding journey that started in the early 1990's. Each program was undertaken for different reasons, sometimes to expand training programs, sometimes to expand consulting opportunities, and other times to continue the learning journey that begins with opportunities to spend time with the individuals who have developed these tools.

While each of these programs was undertaken for different reasons, once the journey began, it was immediately clear that the applications and objectives of each tool were different – yet the conceptual consistency was very high. At no time during this journey have I found myself with any concepts or applications from de Bono or Barker where there was disagreement. In fact I quickly discovered that there was a very high level of conceptual consistency. From the foundations of both Barker's and de Bono's thinking about how the brain works, to the fundamental nature of the tools they developed, I often found myself thinking: they're saying the same things.

While each has some unique characteristics and different applications, it is very true that they represent a consistent and effective set of thinking tools to be used in a variety of different situations

### A Personal Note:

I've learned a few lessons from life, education, and the military (hopefully I will learn more from each) that have really helped. One of them is tell people what you're going to tell them, tell it, and then tell people what you've told them – some good advice for writers and teachers in almost all situations.

So, if anyone is reading this analysis and hoping for a critical comparison ranking one of these approaches over the others, it's not going to happen here. It is my belief that each of these tools is a very powerful thinking tool with excellent possibilities for both application and success. I have used them all successfully. I have learned to appreciate the complexity and richness of each of them.

So here's what I am going to show you – how these techniques are more similar than they are different, how they don't disagree with each other on anything substantial, and how they, in fact, can work extremely well with each other.

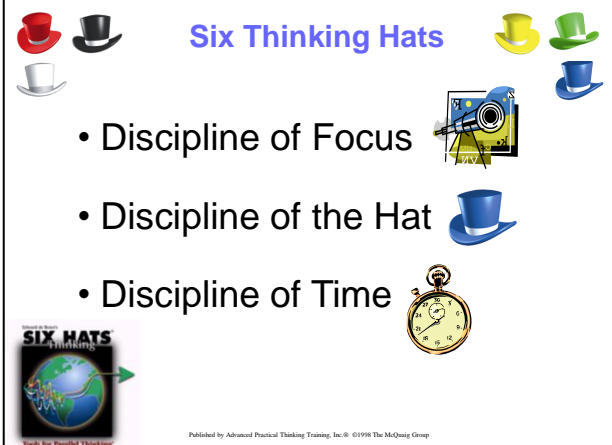
## Focus, Time, Rules of the Game

Each of these tools from Edward de Bono and Joel Barker use three key elements: focus, time, and “rules of the game.” I believe these elements are a key reason for the success of these tools when applied to issues in organizations.




Focus, in some way defining the subject to be explored, is so critical for each of these tools that I’m going to explore this in greater detail on the following pages.

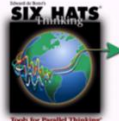
Time is a key component – actually one of the “rules of the game” for each of these tools as well – and an important rule that is tied to objectives of each. These tools promise to take less time than traditional methods – or at best to generate far more quality thinking in the time allowed. Two examples:


- In **Six Thinking Hats**, “the discipline of a short time forces thinkers to focus and prevents them from rambling off in all directions.” Times are often limited to three to four minutes under each hat.



**Six Thinking Hats**

- Discipline of Focus 
- Discipline of the Hat 
- Discipline of Time 

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**The Implications Wheel®**  
Rules

1. Assume that the previous implication happens, then ask “What might happen as a direct result of this?”
2. Implications must follow directly from the preceding implication
  - if it depends on an intervening event, submit that intervening event as your implication and keep your original implication for the next round
3. Complete the sentence that begins “One possibility is...”
4. Repetition and contradictions are okay
5. The weird and the obvious are okay
6. Include positive and negative implications
7. Be specific and concrete
8. Limit your discussion
  - As soon as your group agrees that an implication is a possible result of the preceding implication, and that it is specific, enter it and move on to the next

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- For the **Implications Wheel**, a key rule is “As soon as you agree on an implication (that ‘it’s possible’), stop the discussion and move on.”

“Playing the Game” is also a concept that is important enough for the success of the tools to explore in a little more detail.

## **Playing the Game**

As discussed earlier, each of the Barker and de Bono tools has clearly stated objectives. Like so many games, they start out with “the objective of...is:” Each then moves beyond that to other key similarities to card and board games.

### **Game Boards**

The training for these tools includes the use of a number of forms, worksheets, and computer-assisted tools for “playing the game.” While the forms aren’t essential to make the tools work, they often clearly facilitate the process. In some cases, a variety of props, playing cards, game pieces (hats), are helpful.

### **Instructions**

Like the opening of a new board game, these processes are almost always started with some “instructions.” For the de Bono and Barker programs, this means training recommended unless the process is highly facilitated by a qualified facilitator. The training for these programs ranges from one to four days. Extensive experience with these tools clearly demonstrates that the quality of the results is strongly tied to the level of “understanding” for the participants.

### **Directions and Rules**

The most interesting aspect of this game-like element is the heavy reliance on the rules. Rules are taught, followed religiously in practice sessions, provided on “rule cards,” and emphasized as a critical part of the process.

What is perhaps most important about these similarities to games is that they make the process work – and participants almost always seem willing to “play the game.” It’s a critical element in the success of these programs.

## Other Similarities

There are other real similarities among the tools. It's obvious that some underlying concepts or patterns of thinking are evident. Here are five more thoughts:

Edward de Bono makes extensive use of how the brain works to clearly present the logic behind some of his thinking, particularly in the creative techniques of **Lateral Thinking**. In fact, a key part of the introduction to that program talks about how the brain makes the best possible use of the information it has to reach a conclusion (or a goal). There is a strong consistency to Joel Barker's "paradigm" work. I also sense this similarity when I see a group working an **Implications Wheel**. What they first report to be difficult – while they're learning to play by the rules – suddenly becomes easier when they get started and the implications just start flowing. They're following a path that is just so logical, it happens.

Similarly, the **Implications Wheel** starts with a "what if" statement as a starting point for exploring the future – what's possible? In **Lateral Thinking**, one method of phrasing a provocation is to propose a "what if" to develop alternatives - possibilities. And both then use this similar way of provoking our minds to start thinking in the directions of the future in the use of the **Implications Wheel** or the direction of alternatives in the use of **Lateral Thinking** for creativity.

A third point of similarity is in the use a very similar metaphor. de Bono talks about direction, that it's important (emphasized in **Six Thinking Hats**) to look in one direction (Hat) at a time. Barker makes extensive use of a "scouting" metaphor for the **Implications Wheel**.

A fourth point relates to how the Green Hat (in Six Thinking Hats) is used to identify alternatives for addressing the negatives of the Black Hat – and how in the Implications Wheel, another key Decision Strategy is "Constructing Barriers" to eliminate, or lessen, the damage from a negative implication.


### Scouting the Future

- **Speed – Scouts have to be fast**
- **A Sampling – Not Comprehensive**
- **Qualitative – Insights, anecdotes, etc.**
- **Many directions – Spread out**
- **Mapping – Map their explorations**
- **Decision enhancing – Enhance decisions of "wagon masters."**




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A fifth point of similarity is how each of these authors addresses the importance of “information” in the processes. In **Six Thinking Hats**, the White Hat is devoted to identifying and evaluating the “information” related to an issue being examined. In the **Implications Wheel**, an important step of evaluating an exploration is to identify “Information Needs.”



**white hat**

- What information do we have?
- What information do we need?
- What information would we like to have?
- How are we going to get the missing information?



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## Information Needs

**Information Needs**

a) **As scouts, did we identify some possibilities where we...**

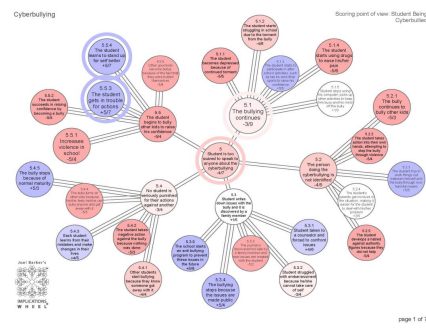
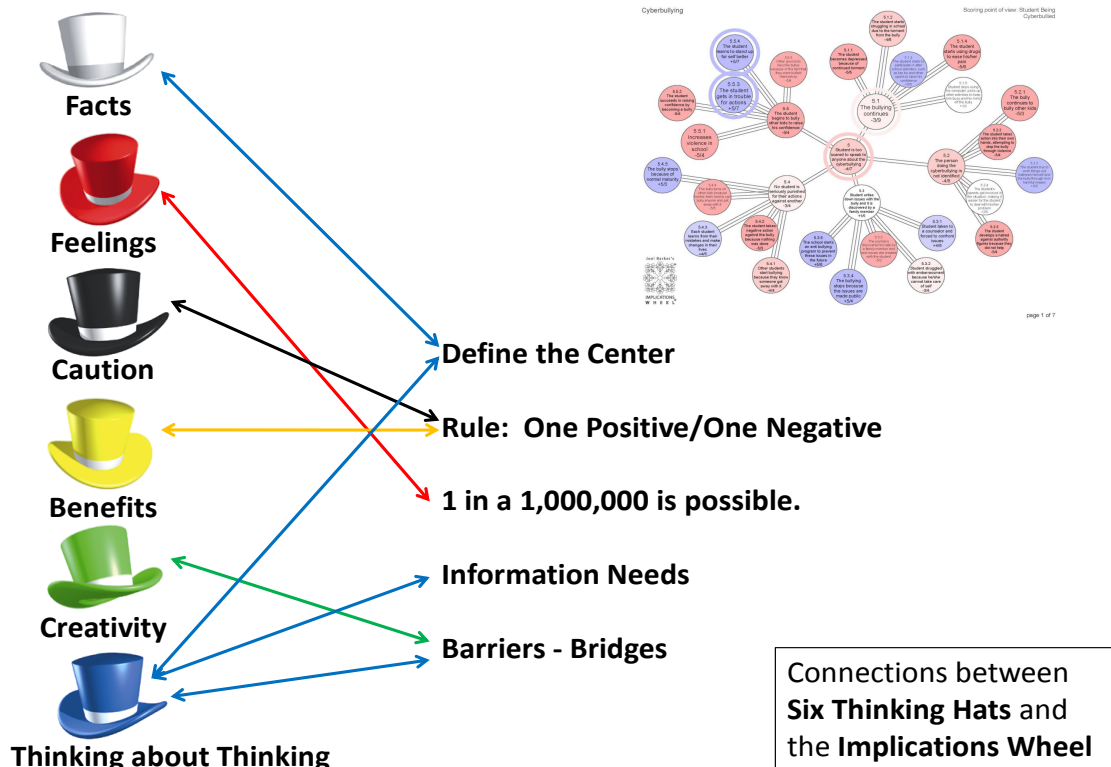
- 1) **Clearly didn't know much about...?**
- 2) **Might really benefit from more information?**

b) **How are we going to get it?**



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The connections are strong. The ones represented here can be portrayed graphically with the following:



## Defining the Center - Focus

Each of these techniques has a specific part of the process (mentioned earlier) which emphasizes the importance of carefully defining the issue or problem. Here is one very strong comparison that demonstrates this point.

In **Six Thinking Hats**, one of the most important “hats” is the Blue Hat, the process control hat, used to carefully define the problem. In learning **Six Thinking Hats**, the problem definition is critical, learning how to develop alternative definitions is very important. The Blue Hat is used to organize and plan a meeting, carefully define the issue for discussion, and generally “control” the entire process, keeping it on track and focused.



In **Lateral Thinking**, control ranges from the creation of a “Creative Hit List” to the necessity of defining the “direction” of the creative thinking. Is it broad or “general area focus,” for example, “let’s have some creative thinking about employee recognition”? Or is it a “purpose focus,” for example, “let’s improve our current employee-of-the-month program?” Defining the “focus” of the process is critical first step in Lateral Thinking.

In the **Implications Wheel**, defining the “center” is also a critical first step. The center must be defined with enough detail that participants see the direction of the process. If necessary, assumptions are made about details. It is important that the participants in an **Implications Wheel** “get it.” Time spent at the beginning of the exploration defining “where you’re going” is essential.

For the **Strategy Matrix**, clearly defining the organization’s strategic objectives and key characteristics represents a first step to the process that is critical for the successful application of the tool.

According to de Bono, a skilled creative thinker should be able to focus. Indeed, there are times when the focus itself is the most important part of creativity, for example, when you focus on something which no one else has bothered to think about. The “Discipline of Focus,” being very clear as to what you are thinking about at the moment, is one of three key disciplines in **Lateral Thinking**. The others are the “Discipline of Technique” and the “Discipline of Time.”

### Area Focus

- Looks at the “where” but not the “why”
- Moves away from focusing only on problems
- The focus can be broad or narrow

“I want some ideas in the area of . . .

### Purpose Focus

- There is a purpose.
- Define the desired outcome.

Examples:

- Solve a problem.
- Achieve an objective.
- Make an improvement.

**Focus**

**Why Is Focus Important?**

- Focus is generally the weakest part of practical creativity.
- Those who become skilled at Focus can achieve good creative results even if they don't have a high degree of skill in the Lateral Thinking tools.

**de Bono**  
Thinking Systems

de Bono Thinking Systems. © 2006. The de Bono Group Inc.

“What do I want to achieve with the ideas that come from my thinking?”



## Paradigms and Patterns

Joel Barker is best known for his “Paradigm” work. Edward de Bono is primarily known for “Lateral Thinking” Underlying both is a concept about how our brains work and another concept that shows a strong conceptual compatibility between programs. Barker defines “paradigms” as a pattern or model, a system of rules that does two things, (1) sets limits or boundaries and (2) provides guidance for solving problems. The **Implications Wheel** is the Barker tool which sets out to uncover “implications that otherwise may never have been seen until it was too late.”

de Bono talks about **Lateral Thinking** as a “way of thinking which seeks changes in perceptions...” A key foundation of **Lateral Thinking** is the process by which our brains organize information into clear patterns so that the tools of **Lateral Thinking** can challenge existing patterns. Note the similarity of these concepts. Paradigms and patterned thinking, meaning essentially the same thing, become conceptual foundations of the processes.

In the **Implications Wheel**, the rules and process direct participants to develop implications that would not have been seen by following traditional thinking. The need to develop both positive and negative implications and think about what “might happen next?” develops new paradigms.

Similarly, in **Lateral Thinking**, almost everything is designed to shift the thinking into new possibilities. But also under **Six Thinking Hats**, the discussion is guided to bring out both the positive (Yellow Hat), the negative (Black Hat), and the possibilities or alternatives (Green Hat)

These same rules work to balance tendencies toward intuitive or analytical thinking. The **Implication Wheel** is a very intuitive process during the development of implications while the scoring is very analytical. Under **Six Thinking Hats**, the Red Hat adds intuition to the logical positive of the Yellow Hat and the logical negative of the Black Hat.

And a final note: de Bono argues that creativity is very logical, in hindsight because “once the connection is made, the pattern is obvious.” Patterns and paradigms are another solid connection between the work of Joel Barker and Edward de Bono.

## Some Sharing of Key Points

The de Bono and Barker techniques are powerful enough in their own ways that each serves its individual objectives well. However, there appear to be a few cases where integrating features from one with the other would make the tools even more powerful.

1. Joel Barker's **Implication Wheel** requires "at least one positive and one negative implication off each node." I have shown in actual experiments that using a de Bono Yellow Hat focus to initially generate positive implications, then a Black Hat to initially generate negative implications made the technique work even faster.
2. Another element from de Bono's tools, the announcing of time limits, has also facilitated progress for both the **Implications Wheel** and the **Strategy Matrix**. A formal "tip" for contributing good implications is the "take thirty seconds" to think individually before contributing was taken directly from **Six Thinking Hats**.
3. Barker's structured approach in the **Implications Wheel**, working in concentric circles from a clearly defined "center," is a clear improvement for complex questions compared to the more simple de Bono "Consequences – Sequence" tool in **Direct Attention Thinking Tools**. The question's the same – the structure makes the tool more thorough if the desired objective is more than a quick assessment of consequences.

## Call for an Experiment

There is one area where I believe a direct comparison of one technique from de Bono and Barker would be possible: a discussion of a “what-if” issue using the **Implications Wheel** and **Six Thinking Hats**. It would be very interesting to see the results of a highly facilitated **Implications Wheel** and a facilitated **Six Thinking Hats** discussion, with two separate but similar groups, on a topic that was defined exactly the same for each group. Time limits would be set the same for each group and the results (output) could then be compared. While there are several sample discussion issues used in **Six Thinking Hats** training, this experiment would be best conducted with a real issue, precisely defined to meet the standards of the **Implications Wheel** for a “center” and the Blue Hat guidance for defining an issue and determining a sequence of hats to be used.

## Update

The experiment proposed in the previous paragraph was conducted after the initial version of this analysis was prepared. Two specific issues were explored with teams each exploring the same two issues and each using both the **Six Thinking Hats** process and the **Implications Wheel**. The topics explored were:

- Increased absenteeism in the workplace
- Implementing a performance-based hiring process

The results of the experiment are described in **Thinking about Thinking II**.

## Author

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