

THINKING FLEXIBLY

By

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*“Change is the new normal: no industry is standing still these days,
and this means that the innovation challenges we face are also constantly changing.”
--Adam Richardson, creative director at Frog Design*

Do you ever find yourself fixed in your way of looking at a problem? Perhaps you, or someone you are working with, stop thinking and just say “my mind is made up, don’t confuse me with more facts”. Have you ever known someone who has difficulty in considering alternative points of view? *Their* way to solve a problem seems to be the *only* way. When you get to that point, you are not thinking flexibly!

Flexible thinkers have the capacity to change their minds as they receive additional data. They engage in multiple and simultaneous outcomes and activities, draw upon a repertoire of problem solving strategies and practice style flexibility, knowing when it is appropriate to think broadly and globally and when a situation requires detailed precision. They create and seek novel approaches and have a well-developed sense of humor. They envision a range of consequences.

Flexible thinkers have a great deal of control. They know that they have and can develop options and alternatives to consider. They understand means-ends relationships being able to work within rules, criteria and regulations. They can shift from the short term, immediate reactions to the bigger picture. They are able to work with people from

different cultures and who represent diverse perspectives because they recognize the distinctness of other people's ways of experiencing and making meaning.

Flexible thinkers are able to shift, at will, through multiple perceptual positions. One perceptual orientation is *egocentrism*--perceiving from our own point of view. By contrast, *allocentrism* is the position in which we perceive through another person's orientation. We operate from this second position when we empathize with other's feelings, predict how others are thinking, and anticipate potential misunderstandings.

Another perceptual position is "macro-centric". It is similar to looking down from a balcony at ourselves and our interactions with others. This bird's-eye view is useful for discerning themes and patterns from different kinds of information. Since many problems are solved with incomplete information, flexible thinkers have the capacity to perceive patterns and can jump across gaps of incomplete knowledge when some of the pieces are missing.

Yet another perceptual orientation is micro-centric--examining the individual and sometimes minute parts that make up the whole. This "worm's-eye view", without which science, technology, and any complex enterprise could not function, involves logical analytical computation and searching for causality in methodical steps. It requires attention to detail, precision, and orderly progressions.

Flexible thinkers display confidence in their intuition. They tolerate confusion and ambiguity up to a point, and are willing to let go of a problem trusting their subconscious to continue working creatively and productively. Flexibility is the cradle of humor, creativity and repertoire. While there are many possible perceptual positions--past,

present, future, egocentric, allocentric, macro centric, visual, auditory, kinesthetic--the flexible mind is activated by knowing when to shift perceptual positions.

So, is there any hope for those who would be considered rigid, fixed and set in their ways? Yes. An amazing discovery about our human brain is auto-plasticity--your ability to "rewire", change and even teach yourself to become smarter.

Practice thinking flexibly by getting into the habit of asking yourself such questions as:

- How would someone else look as this plan?
- If I were John, how would I feel?
- What are some alternative solutions to this problem?
- What can I learn from someone with whom I disagree?
- As I consider this plan, what are my long-range goals and what immediate steps must I take to achieve them?

"This ability to go back and forth between the little details and the big picture is evident in the leaders I admire most,"

Robert Sutton [Fast Company online/FC Expert Blog \(3/22\)](#)