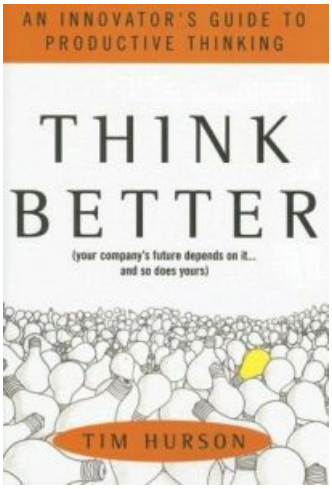


# Book Think Better

## An Innovator's Guide to Productive Thinking

Tim Hurson
McGraw-Hill, 2007

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## Recommendation

Tim Hurson begins with a simple premise: Anyone can learn to "think better" – in other words, more creatively and productively. He says that by applying his methods, anyone can reliably come up with fresh ideas and solutions. If you've dipped into the fields of creativity, innovation or brainstorming before, you may find yourself nodding along, since his initial ideas are not surprising. Similarly, some of the techniques Hurson offers and the examples he shares to illustrate them will be familiar to anyone who has even a passing acquaintance with the field. However, others of his techniques are new. Hurson supplies prompts, basic diagrams, questions and examples. He adores mnemonics, formulas and acronyms. The book is written clearly and simply enough to appeal to inexperienced readers. However, *BooksInShort* especially recommends it to managers and trainers with knowledge of the field; you'll be more able to quickly see the distinctions between Hurson's techniques and other brainstorming methods and appreciate the value he is offering.

## Take-Aways

- Thinking is not an innate talent. It is a skill you can develop.
- Most people avoid thinking as much as they can.
- Reproductive thinking repeats past patterns. Productive thinking generates brand-new ideas.
- Productive thinking combines critical and creative thinking.
- When people brainstorm, they often stop too soon. The best ideas come well into the process, when you get far enough from the familiar to form wild ideas.
- To think productively, start by asking what's wrong with the current situation.
- Continue to ask questions until you get to the core questions.
- Generate many ideas to answer these questions.
- Sift, sort and evaluate them until you can imagine an ideal future.
- Once you have your solution, commit to it through systematic planning.

## Summary

### Thinking About Thinking

Many people believe that thinking ability is innate – but that's not true. Anyone can – and should – learn to think better than he or she does right now. The economy is shifting: No longer based on things, it's now based on information. Thus, your company's greatest asset is its ability to understand and manipulate information and ideas.

> "Reproductive thinking is a way to refine what is known; it aims for efficiency. Productive thinking is a way to generate the new; it aims for insight."

As the first step in improving your thinking, you must face the unpleasant reality that you don't think as much as you assume you do. No one does. Instead, most people avoid thinking whenever possible; indeed, avoidance is so common that you can categorize the techniques for doing so.

These are the main types:

1. **"Monkey mind"** – This is how Buddhists describe mental distraction. The mind wanders and jumps from thought to thought like an agitated monkey in a tree.

2. **"Gator brain"** – This is the brain's most primitive part – its reptilian core. Its main concern is survival. The alligator has only a small repertoire of responses to new stimuli: Eat them, have sex with them, fight them, run away from them or freeze and hope they will go away. When threatened, humans reflexively revert to these same responses. In a genuinely dangerous situation, when you don't have time to think, that's a good thing. However, in daily life, reptilian responses are often dysfunctional.
3. **"Elephant's tether"** – In India, trainers chain young elephants to a stake in the ground. When the elephants are still small, they aren't strong enough to break the chain, so they learn that they can't. As a result, they don't try to break it when they're bigger and more powerful. Your mind constructs similar patterns. In many cases, they help you make sense of the world. However, if you can't break patterns when necessary, they trap you.

## Reproductive and Productive Thinking

Reproductive thinking prevents you from wasting time reinventing the wheel. These are the three levels of reproductive thinking:

1. **Unconscious** – When you're doing something mindless, such as brushing your teeth, you don't need to make decisions about it. Doing it the same old way is fine.
2. **Intentional** – Professional disciplines from accounting to medicine have standardized procedures. Following a checklist prevents errors. And no one wants a pilot or surgeon to invent new methods each time. There is too much at stake to deviate from the tried and true.
3. **"*Kaizen*"** – This Japanese word literally translates as "good change." It means following well-designed processes mindfully, continually looking for ways to improve them.

> "Reproductive thinking is essentially a matter of repeating the past: doing what you've done before and thinking what you've thunk before."

Reproductive thinking doesn't help you solve new problems, however. In that case, the old patterns no longer apply. Instead, you must use productive thinking to create new knowledge and understanding.

If reproductive thinking is kaizen, then productive thinking is "*tenkaizen*," the Japanese word for "good revolution." You're no longer trying to make small changes in a basically sound process; rather, you're transforming your worldview and creating new processes. Productive thinking has two parts: "creative thinking and critical thinking." Separating these two approaches is essential. Otherwise, you immediately become bogged down in enumerating the flaws in your ideas and all the possible objections to them. Instead, when you're thinking creatively, concentrate on generating a lot of ideas. Suspend judgment: The new ideas are too weak to withstand criticism. Creative thinking is "expansive": Ideas spawn more ideas.

## Critical Thinking

Once you have lots of ideas, call upon your inner critic to sort and evaluate them in these three stages:

1. **"Analyze"** – Examine, look deeply, take things apart.
2. **"Judge"** – Check to see if the new ideas actually work.
3. **"Select"** – Look at the pile of ideas and reject some of them.

> "Reproductive thinking can fashion the perfect buggy whip, but only productive thinking can imagine a car."

Productive thinking is difficult. Especially when you're in known territory, your reproductive thinking habits will provide immediate answers to problems and questions. But, they'll look a lot like what you're already doing. To become genuinely productive, "stay in the question." Keep asking. This is uncomfortable but necessary, because your initial answers will be familiar ones. They'll be the answers you already know.

> "By trying simultaneously to think creatively to generate ideas and think critically to judge ideas, you end up sabotaging any chance of success."

Often, people stop brainstorming too soon. Instead, press on. Brainstorming has three steps: First, generate safe ideas. Next, get an inkling of new, strange ideas. Finally, come up with really crazy ideas, some of which seem unacceptable or even illegal. To get to that productive final third of the process, try churning out lots of ideas as fast as you can.

> "Productive thinking requires us not to rush to answers but to hang back, to keep asking new questions even when the answers to the old ones seem so clear, so obvious, so right."

Most people try to solve a problem in three steps: They identify it. They "pick a solution." They act. Unfortunately, this process short circuits productive thinking and generates only a few familiar solutions. Instead, follow a six-step process to generate rich, useful and original solutions.

## Step 1: "What's Going On?"

Describe the situation. Divide your investigation into steps to make sure you cover everything. Start by identifying "the itch": What exactly is irritating about the current situation? Then, determine the impact of the problem and whom it affects.

> "Our minds hate not interpreting, not closing in on answers. When we do close in on one answer or interpretation, we effectively block out any others."

Evaluate what you do and don't know about the problem. Try making a "KnoWonder" diagram: Write "Know" on the left side of a page and "Wonder" on the right. List the things you are sure about on the left and those you are curious about on the right.

Finally, imagine what the situation will look like when you've solved your problem. Try the "I3," or "Influence, Importance and Imagination," method. List the components of your ideal future; then categorize them according to whether you have influence over them, whether they are important and whether they will take some

imagination to create and develop.

### Step 2: "What's Success?"

Generating new ideas is easy compared to persuading people to act on them. Both individuals and organizations tend to get stuck in their habits. The past exercises a gravitational pull. To get people moving, create an even more powerful "future pull": Start by shutting your eyes and visualizing the future. Be specific. Imagine your work day, your feelings and your interactions with colleagues. Shape and reshape your image. Then, write a press release or a description for your company's annual report about your success. Don't worry about being logical; that will come later. Instead, focus on the vision and write it down.

> "All of us have had the experience of coming up with a 'solution' to a problem that hasn't done anything to solve the problem or that's made the problem even worse."

Once you've imagined the future, try the "DRIVE" exercise. Write the letters *D-R-I-V-E* across the top of a page. Under *D*, describe what your solution must do. Under *R*, note restrictions. Under *I*, list what you'll need to invest in it. Under *V*, list the values that will guide your actions. Finally, under *E*, list the "Essential Outcomes," or project requirements. Or, try the "AIM" exercise: List "Advantages, Impediments and Maybes."

### Step 3: "What's the Question?"

People often fail to solve problems because they ask the wrong questions. Finding the correct core question is like finding the first piece of a puzzle. After you have that one, the rest fall into place. To find the core question, ask a lot of "Catalytic Questions." Begin with "HMI" ("How might I...?") or "HMW" ("How might we...?") questions.

> "One of the major barriers to productive thinking is the almost compulsive drive in most business organizations to be right."

Once you have a long list of working questions, focus them by using "C5": "Cull, Cluster, Combine, Clarify, Choose." Cull the questions, deleting those that may bias your thinking. Cluster them into groups of related ideas. Combine them by finding interrelationships. Clarify the questions you have left by rewording or reorganizing them. Finally, choose your central question.

### Step 4: "Generate Answers"

Now that you have some good questions, answer them. This stage is like traditional brainstorming. First, generate a lot of solutions. Don't evaluate them. No ideas are bad. Once you have a long list, use the C5 method to sift through them. Ask "What's UP?" about ideas that seem unworkable. "UP" stands for "underlying principle." By seeking it, you can translate and reframe crazy-sounding ideas – they may be more useful than they initially seem.

### Step 5: "Forge the Solution"

Use an "Evaluation Screen." Write your "Success Criteria" across the top of a page. Phrase them simply and directly and use as many as you need – although if you have more than seven, your solution is probably too complicated. Along the side of the page, list all the ideas that have survived the C5 and What's UP processes. Make a grid, and evaluate all your solutions one criterion at a time. (Don't evaluate one idea at a time, because you want to compare them.) Use a simple rating system, such as plus, minus or neutral.

> "Particularly in organizations, there is a strong tendency to go back to the tried and true, the safe, the questions that don't rock the boat too much, the questions that aren't disturbing."

Review your final ideas using the "POWER" method:

- **"Positives"** – Why will these ideas work?
- **"Objections"** –What's wrong with them? Why won't they work?
- **"What else?"** –What's missing from your ideas?
- **"Enhancements"** – How can you improve them?
- **"Remedies"** – How can you fix what's wrong with them?

### Step 6: "Align Resources"

Finally, plan and prepare. All strategies must change as circumstances change; your goal at this stage is to project what you'll need to do to make your vision a reality. Divide your plan into steps. Write all the tasks involved on sticky notes. For each task, list an "observable outcome" that will show the task has been completed. Assign each task to a specific individual. If you can't assign some tasks, can you eliminate them, or come up with additional staff? Post each task, with its outcome and assignee, on a "Great Wall of Time": a schedule that shows who will do what, when.

> "A plan is a thing, an organized set of data marshaled around targets and timelines."

As you plan, identify "Assistors and Resistors": the people who will help or block you. Keep track of "EFFECT": the "Energy" the task will take; the "Funds" you'll need to invest; the "Free time" the task will consume; the "Expertise" it will require; the "Conditions" you'll face and the "Things" you'll need to do it. During the planning stage, you may need to loop back to earlier stages in your thinking to readjust your questions and answers. Once you've finished your Great Wall, assistors and resistors and EFFECT analyses, create an "Action Book," with a page for each step. Record who is responsible for it, who else will be involved, when they will start and finish the task, the resources involved and other essential details. Standardize the pages as much as possible, to make following progress as easy as possible for everyone involved.

> "All models are wrong. At best they are imperfect reflections of reality."

Remember that productive thinking is just a model. It won't always neatly fit reality. Don't get addicted to it. You don't need productive thinking for every circumstance: It's unnecessary when the solution to a problem is clear, when you must take immediate action or when getting by is good enough. Use it when you need to generate original ideas because the old ones aren't working. Apply I3: Use productive thinking when you have influence over the situation, when it is important and when you need imagination. However, to become a skilled productive thinker, you must practice. Incorporate it into organizational routines. Start small, by introducing one technique at a time.

## About the Author

**Tim Hurson** is a founding director of Facilitators Without Borders and a founding partner of thinkx, a firm providing training in productive thinking and innovation.

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