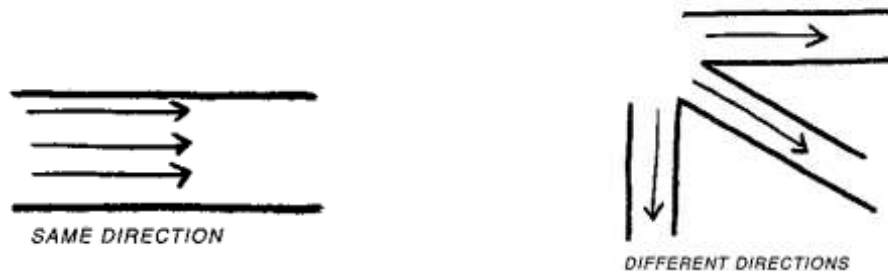


APC: ALTERNATIVES, POSSIBILITIES, CHOICES

This is another attention-directing tool. Instead of moving 'forward' with our thinking we look at 'parallel' possibilities.



Doing an APC means making a deliberate effort to generate alternatives at that particular point. As with the PMI, the APC does no more than actualize the desire to look for alternatives 'at this particular point'. There is no magic about it and at the same time there is a lot of effectiveness in it. It converts a general desire into a specific operating instruction (or 'executive concept'). We can look now at some of the situations in which we may want to 'do an APC.

EXPLANATION

A young man is seen to be pouring cans of beer into the petrol tank of his car at a petrol station. Do an APC on this. What possible explanations might there be for this behaviour? Some starting alternatives are given below. Try and add to them:

- it was not his car: he was sabotaging it
- he was drunk
- it was an advertising stunt for beer
- it was petrol but the pump was out of action so he used cans and so on...

In judging the behaviour of others, in trying to explain a swing in a political poll and in examining market behaviour, we need to create alternative explanations no matter how likely one of them may seem. The search is not for the most likely but for the most likely *and* a number of others as well. Explanation is an area where it is only too easy to be trapped by the adequate.

HYPOTHESIS

Although men seem to be smoking less, women seem to be smoking more. Do an APC on this and put forward some alternative hypotheses as to why this might be. There are times when an hypothesis is virtually the same as an explanation. On the whole an explanation refers to a single happening or instance, whereas hypothesis refers to some process or trend. As I mentioned earlier, we need to generate alternative hypotheses no matter how tempted we are to consider one of them the best and 'true' one.

PERCEPTION

In New Zealand I was once talking to a group of senior industrialists about opportunity development. Many of them complained that in New Zealand there were so many restrictions and regulations that it was difficult to pursue opportunities. One of them looked at things in an alternative way. He welcomed the regulations by saying: 'If you learn how to cope with the

regulations just think how effectively they keep back your competitors, and new entrants, - so I see them as enhancing opportunity.'

A research project was condemned for wasting money when it set out to show that in schools with swimming pools the children spent more time swimming. Do an APC on this: how else could you look at the project?

PROBLEMS

With problems, APC can be done at several points. This first is in the definition of the problem. The best definition of a problem can only be reached by finding the solution and then working backwards to the definition. But we can look for alternative definitions of the problem. Do an APC on alternative definitions of the peak travel problem in city transport.

When it comes to tackling the problem we can generate a number of different approaches instead of just searching for the best one from the start. Do an APC on approaches to the peak travel problem in cities: try to generate about four different approaches.

Finally, when we have an adequate solution to a problem, we can go beyond the adequate and search for different solutions. The satisfaction of finding a solution at all makes us very unwilling to look for another one. Besides, the other solution may be found by someone else!

REVIEW

A problem is something we are forced to tackle. In a review we need to make an effort of will to look again at something which is not a problem, which is going reasonably well, which does not demand attention. We look at it, however, to see if the process could be simplified or made more effective or more productive. This always involves seeing if there are other ways of carrying out the operation (and also whether it needs to be done at all). Do an APC (review style) on the packaging of chocolate bars.

DESIGN

In design we set out to create something that is going to achieve some purpose. In a sense it is much freer than problem-solving because, provided we achieve the purpose, we can use different approaches and different styles.

The important point here - as far as APC goes - is to realize when you are using alternatives which lie within the same general approach and when you really are using a totally different approach.

Only too often, in my experience, a proposed alternative approach is only an alternative within the same basic approach. Do an APC on the design of a telephone.

DECISION

Business schools and management training put a great deal of emphasis on making decisions - as I shall do later in this book. It is assumed that the alternatives are obvious and easy to find. Yet very often, difficulty in making a decision stems from a failure to produce sufficient alternatives. The decision process itself will not produce these alternatives. We need to shift some emphasis away from the deciding between alternatives to the generating of alternatives. A competitor undercuts the price of the toilet rolls your company is selling. You are asked to decide whether you should lower prices to match his. Do an APC on the alternatives available for your decision.

COURSE OF ACTION

I am told that there is an old Jewish saying which states that if there are two courses of action you should always take the third. As in decision making, this properly shifts the emphasis to the search for alternatives. Finding courses of action involves problem solving, design and decision making. Do an APC on the courses of action open to you if you invented a new children's game.

FORECASTING

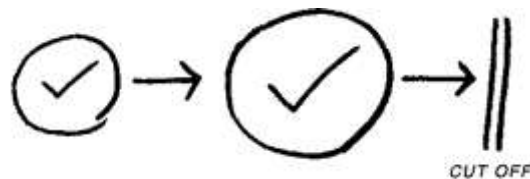
In business as in many other areas it is important to try to tell something about the future.

Decisions and plans made now are going to operate in the future. Investments made now are going to pay off in the future. All future forecasting is based on the extrapolation of present trends. No matter how incorrect this method may be, there is no way anyone would ever be brought to believe in a forecast derived in any other way. Yet we know there will be discontinuities and the future will not just consist of present trends carried forwards. The best we can do is to generate alternative futures in a deliberate manner and allow them to enrich our perception even though we will never believe them until after they have happened. Science fiction performs a useful function in this respect. Do an APC on possible future scenarios for the entertainment industry.

The above list of situations in which an APC might be useful is not complete. We should also look at negotiation, communication, opportunity search, investment, planning and many other areas. What matters is being able to say to ourselves, or others in the group, 'let's do an APC at this point'.

PRACTICALITY

There are two common objections to the APC process. The first is that it is a waste of time and creates unnecessary work. The second is that too many alternatives create a dither of indecision. Both have some validity.



The answer to the first objection is that there is no way of telling that the first answer to a problem is the best one until at least some effort has been made to find other answers. Further alternatives in a decision situation do increase the work of deciding between them. That is just too bad. You can never improve your decision by impoverishing the range of alternatives. Anyone who does not like the work of decision making should get out of that job.

The answer to the second objection is to be ruthless about practical cut-offs. Sir Robert Watson-Watt, the father of radar, apparently had a saying: 'You get one idea today, you get a better idea tomorrow, you get the best idea... never.' With that I agree. The designer who is forever changing the design makes production impossible. If I were to re-write my manuscripts they would always get better - but never 34j) get published as the process of improvement can be never ending. So there is a need for practical cut-offs and deadlines and the freezing of designs.

The main point is that we should not be reluctant to look for alternatives because we cannot conceive of anything better than what we have. The secondary point is that we should not be afraid to look for alternatives for fear of the extra hassle they might cause.

ALTERNATIVES AND CREATIVITY

Without the willingness to look for alternatives we remain trapped in the past and in what we have always done before. If you generate alternatives you can always reject them if they do not seem superior to the existing way of doing things. But if you never generate alternatives you never have a choice.

Generating alternatives opens up possibilities. As I have indicated in the introduction to this book, the 'possibility' system has been the driving force in the success of western science and technology.

A tool that deliberately signals the need to look for alternatives is a key thinking tool.

We need it even more because the patterning nature of the mind seeks certainty - not alternatives.

Try the following warming-up exercises:

1. A person who is usually punctual starts to be late. What are some alternative explanations?
2. There is a sudden rise in the number of burglaries. Give some possible explanations.
3. A new antique shop opens up across the street from your antique shop. What action alternatives should you consider?
4. You have a long drive into work. The roads are getting more and more crowded. What action alternatives could you consider?
5. You want to help discourage young people from smoking. What alternative approaches might there be?
6. Give some alternative approaches to dealing with a school bully.

A lot of humour is based on alternatives. The simple pun is based on alternative meanings of the same word. A rich man complained that he had had a miserable birthday because he was only given a golf club - and it did not even have a swimming pool.

A famous advertising slogan read: 'Nothing works faster than Anacin'. This is meant to mean that no treatment acts faster (to cure a headache) than does Anacin. It could also mean that 'nothing' (taking nothing) has a quicker effect on headaches than taking Anacin.

There are many sorts of alternatives:

Perception: The same thing can be looked at in many different ways.

Action: Alternative courses of action that can be taken in a situation.

Solutions: Alternative solutions to a problem.

Approaches: Different ways of tackling the problem in order to find a solution.

Explanations: Alternative explanations of how something happened. Alternative hypotheses in science.

Design: Alternative designs, each of which fulfils the purpose of the design (machines, buildings, posters etc.).

Sometimes we are forced to look for alternatives because the traditional way does not work.

Sometimes we want to look for alternatives because we believe we might find a better way than the one we now use. If someone tells you that there are only two possible solutions to a problem, you might spend a few moments thinking of further alternatives. You may or may not find further alternatives, but it is always worth spending some time looking for them.

Perhaps the most difficult thing to do is to stop to look for alternatives when you do not have to.

Gillette invented the safety razor when he stopped to look for an alternative way of shaving. We often assume that things are done in the best possible way, but that is not always so. Often things are done in that way for historical reasons or because no one has tried to find a better way.

Whenever you set out to look for alternatives you must be very clear about the purpose of the alternative.

... 'I want alternative ways of blocking this hole.'

... 'I want alternative ways of carrying water to that point.'

... 'I want alternative suggestions as to how this system might fail.'

'I want alternative colours for the carpet' is quite different from 'I want alternative ways of covering the floor'. If you just say, 'I want alternatives to a carpet,' it is not clear whether you want alternative ways of covering the floor or alternatives that are as warm as a carpet.

The APC is pronounced with each letter separate: 'A', 'P', 'C', or A.P.C. As with CAF, the more formally and the more deliberately the tool is used the more valuable it becomes as a tool.

EXERCISES ON APC

If some mysterious disease suddenly made the majority of people deaf, how would people communicate with each other? Do an APC and give more than three alternatives.

In some countries motorists pay tolls for using the roads. What other ways are there for getting motorists to pay for the roads they use? Do an APC.

You receive a mysterious telephone call asking you to meet someone you do not know at a certain time in a coffee shop. What are the possible explanations for this? What courses of action do you have? Do a double APC.

In a TV quiz show an object is described as being: round, flat and good to eat. It could be a hamburger, or what else? Do an APC listing as many possibilities as you can think of.

A man is seen walking down the high street with a brown paper bag over his head. Why do you think he is doing this? Do an APC and list at least five possible explanations.

You form a group with your friends to raise money for charity. You have just one day to raise as much money as you can. Do an APC and give some alternative approaches to this task.

Some neighbourhoods are very dirty because people drop litter and cans everywhere. How would you suggest tackling this problem? Do an APC and give three approaches.

You are running an insurance company and your salespeople have worked very hard. You want to reward them. You could give them more money as a bonus but you want to find other ways of rewarding them. Do an APC and suggest some alternative rewards.

Can you think of an alternative shape for a TV screen? If you can, use yellow-hat thinking to show the benefits of your new shape.