

PMI: PLUS, MINUS AND INTERESTING

Many highly intelligent people use their thinking to back up or defend their immediate judgement of a matter. The PMI is a perception-broadening tool (attention-directing) which forces a thinker to explore the situation before coming to a judgement.

An explorer returns from an expedition with a very incomplete description of a new island. The explorer is told to go back and to describe what is to be found in the north, the east, the south, the west and the centre of the island. The explorer follows this simple attention-directing framework.

The PMI is pronounced 'P', 'M' 'I', or P.M.I. The PMI is a similar attention-directing framework.

Look at the plus points. Look at the minus points. Look at the interesting points. Only when this full scan has been carried out, reach a judgement or decision.

In practice the PMI is very popular with youngsters because it is so simple and so effective. Even if the PMI alone is used without any further tools, thinking becomes much more effective in real-life situations. Youngsters often get their parents to do a PMI on matters requiring decisions or on instant reactions.

... 'I know you don't like this, but let's do a PMI.'

... 'That seems the right choice, but let's do a PMI.'

... 'We have two options. Let's do a PMI on each.'

The PMI is an exploring tool and also an evaluation tool. Let us see what we will see if we look in all directions. At first sight the PMI may look like a mini-version of the six thinking hats. It resembles the yellow hat, black hat and green hat (interesting). There is a resemblance, but the PMI is directly concerned with good (plus), bad (minus) and interesting points. The black hat is not concerned with minus points directly but with judgement of how something fits facts or experience. Also the black and yellow hats do have to be logical, whereas the PMI does not -and can even include feelings.

The PMI is a very simple, overall, exploration scan.

Exhorting people to take a balanced view is not very effective. The exhortation wears off almost at once. Most people even claim to take a balanced view all the time. In practice they do not.

So the first simple thinking tool is concerned with a broad scan. Each tool in this book is given an acronym in order to give it identity and in order that it may lodge in the mind as something specific. A collection of words will not do that. The tools have to be practical and usable. There are certain aspects of the design of thinking tools which may not be obvious at first sight but do have a reason for being there.

I once asked seventy very bright young adults to write an essay on the suggestion that marriage be a renewable five-year contract. Sixty-seven of them wrote their opinion of the idea in the first sentence of their essay and then used the rest of the essay to support that opinion. There was no exploration of the subject other than to back up an already formed opinion. That is sometimes the style that is recommended for essay writing.

As I mentioned earlier in the book, one of the biggest faults of thinking is the use of it to back up an opinion that has already been formed (by first impression, slight thinking, prejudice or tradition). This is one of the major faults of the intelligence trap, and highly intelligent people suffer from the fault even more than others. They can so ably defend the point of view that actual exploration of the matter seems a waste of time. If you know that you are right and can demonstrate this to others, then why explore the subject?

The PMI is a powerful thinking tool that is so simple that it is almost unlearnable - because everyone thinks he or she uses it anyway. The letters are chosen to give a nicely pronounceable abbreviation so that we may ask ourselves, or others, to 'do a PMI'.

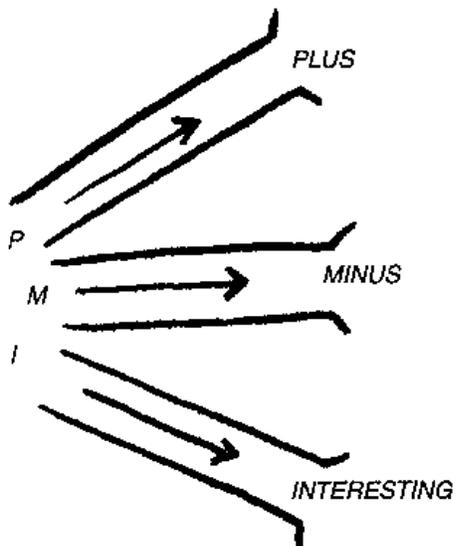
P stands for Plus or the good points

M stands for Minus or the bad points

I stands for Interesting or the interesting points

The PMI is an attention-directing tool. In doing a PMI you deliberately direct your attention first towards the Plus points, then towards the Minus points and finally towards the Interesting points.

This is done in a very deliberate and disciplined manner over a period of about 2 to 3 minutes in all.



The reason for putting it first is that unless some sense of the PMI is absorbed the rest of the 60 are a waste of time. The PMI sets the mood of objectivity and scanning, as I shall describe later.

I was once asked to demonstrate a CoRT lesson to a group of educators in Sydney, Australia. Before starting the lesson I asked the group of 30 boys (aged 10-11) to tell me what they thought of the idea of each of them receiving \$5 a week just for going to school. All of them loved the idea and began to tell me what they would do with the money (buy sweets, comics, etc.). I then explained the PMI and asked them to go through Plus, Minus and Interesting points with regard to the \$5 suggestion. They were to do this by discussion in groups of five. After three minutes a spokesman for each group gave the output. Many points were turned up:

- The bigger boys would beat them up and take the money.
- Parents would not give presents or pocket money.
- The school would raise its charges for meals.
- Who would decide how much each age level was to get? 9 There would be quarrels about the money and strikes.
- Where would the money come from?
- There would be less money to pay teachers.
- There would not be any money for the school to buy a minibus.

At the end of the exercise the class was again asked if they liked the idea. Whereas thirty out of thirty had previously liked the idea, it now appeared that twenty-nine out of thirty had completely **REVERSED** their view and now disliked the idea. What is important to note is that a very simple scanning tool, used by the youngsters themselves, had brought about this change. I had made no further intervention and I had never said a word about the subject matter itself.

Suppose you were asked to do a PMI on the suggestion that all cars should be painted yellow. Your output might be something as follows:

P

- easier to see on the roads
- easier to see at night
- no problem in deciding which colour you wanted
- no waiting to get the colour you wanted
- easier for the manufacturer
- the dealer would need less stock
- it might take the 'macho' element out of car ownership
- cars would tend to become just transport items
- in minor collisions the paint rubbed off on to your car is the same.

M

- boring
- difficult to recognize your car
- very difficult to find your car in a car park
- easier to steal cars
- the abundance of yellow might tire the eyes
- car chases would be difficult for the police
- accident witnesses would have a harder time
- restriction of your freedom to choose
- some paint companies might go out of business.

I

- interesting to see if different shades of yellow arose
- interesting to see if people appreciated the safety factor
- interesting to see whether attitudes towards cars changed
- interesting to see if trim acquired a different colour
- interesting to see if this were enforceable
- interesting to see who would support the suggestion.

Carrying out the process is quite easy. What is not easy is to direct attention deliberately in one direction after another when your prejudices have already decided for you what you should feel about an idea. It is this 'will' to look in a direction that is so important. Once this is achieved then the natural challenge to intelligence is to find as many P or M or I points as you can. So there is a switch. Instead of intelligence being used to support a particular prejudice it is now used to explore the subject matter.

At the end of the exploration emotions and feelings can be used to make a decision about the matter. The difference is that the emotions are now applied after the exploration instead of being applied before and so **PREVENTING** exploration.

INTERESTING

... 'Interesting to see what would happen ..

... 'Interesting to see what this might lead to...'

... 'What would happen if..

You can use phrases like this in order to collect the interesting points. Interesting points are neither good nor bad but points of interest. Interesting points are observations and comments. Neutral points (neither good nor bad) also come under interesting.

The 'I' or Interesting element of the PMI has several functions. It can collect all those points and comments which are neither positive nor negative. (It might be noted that if a particular point is seen both in the *P* and in the *M* direction it is quite in order to include it under both headings.) The *I* also encourages the deliberate habit of exploring a matter outside the judgement framework to see what is interesting about the idea or what it leads to. A simple phrase which is useful for carrying through this *I* scan is: 'It would be interesting to see if...'. The thinker is thereby encouraged to expand the idea rather than just to treat it as static.

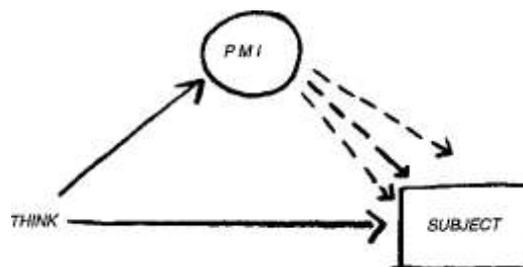
Another aspect of the *T* direction is to see if the idea leads to another idea. This notion of the 'movement value' of an idea will be explored much more fully in the lateral thinking section of this book.

Finally the *T* trains the mind to react to the interest inherent in an idea and not just to judgement feelings about the idea. A thinker should be able to say: 'I do not like your idea but there are these interesting aspects to it...' It is a common enough experience that this sort of reaction is highly unusual.

USE OF THE PMI

Many people would claim to do the PMI anyway. This is possibly true for those situations about which there is a great deal of indecision. But that is not the main purpose of the PMI. On the contrary, the PMI should most especially be used when we have **NO DOUBT** about the situation but have instantly decided that we like it or do not like it (like the Sydney schoolboys' reaction to the \$5 a week). As a habit of mind the PMI is specifically designed to force us to scan in those situations where otherwise we should deem scanning unnecessary.

For example, you can ask someone to 'do a PMI' when that person has summarily dismissed your suggestion as valueless. You can ask someone to 'do a PMI' when there seems to be a prejudged



reaction to a situation. The PMI is useful because it is more oblique than direct disagreement or confrontation. In the PMI you are asking the person to exhibit his or her great intelligence in doing a scan of the subject. This is totally different from asking a person to reverse an opinion. Normally the person so asked is not afraid to do a PMI because he or she feels that this will only support the view that is already held.

I once carried out an experiment with 140 senior executives. I divided them into two random groups according to the date of each person's birthday (odd or even). I then gave each group a suggestion to consider and decide upon. One group got the suggestion of 'a dated currency so that each year the currency would have the year on it and there might be exchange rates between these different dates'. The other group were asked to consider 'that marriage be a five-year renewable contract'. The initial decisions were collected. The problems were now switched. This time the PMI was explained and each person was asked to do a PMI before making a decision. If everyone had been doing something

of the sort in the first place no change would be expected (assuming the groups were random). But there was change. Before the PMI 44% were in favour of the dated currency, but after the PMI only 11 % were in favour. The opposite happened with the contract marriage suggestion: before the PMI 23% were in favour, but after the PMI this rose to 38%.

Doing a PMI is not really the same as listing the 'pros and cons' which tends to be more of a judgement exercise. In addition the 'Interest' direction allows consideration of those matters which would not fall under either pro or con.

TWO STEPS

So instead of just reacting to the situation and then justifying the reaction, the thinker now goes through a two-step process. The first step is deliberately to carry out the PMI operation. The second step is to observe and react to what has been turned up by the PMI scan. It is not unlike preparing a map and then reacting to what is on the map.

PRACTICE

Because the PMI seems so very simple its effectiveness should not be underestimated. I have seen it used to turn a fiercely emotional meeting from prejudice towards consideration of the subject. Once perception is directed in a certain direction it cannot help but see, and once seen something cannot be unseen.

The key is practice. Practise doing the PMI yourself and practise demanding it of others. It can become a simple shorthand instruction. The strangeness of the lettering is important in order to give focus. Mere exhortation to someone to look at the good points and bad points is much too weak to be effective.

SCAN

The PMI is a scanning tool. It is not a matter of thinking of the points as they come up and then dropping each point into a box labelled P, M or I. It is a matter of specifically looking in the Plus direction first and noting what you see (ignore any other points); then looking specifically in the Minus direction and noting what you see (ignore any other points); and finally looking specifically in the Interesting direction.

We sometimes call the CoRT method the 'spectacles method'. If a person is short-sighted and you give that person the appropriate spectacles then the person will be able to see more broadly and more clearly. The person's reactions will then be suited to this better view. The person can still apply exactly the same value system as was used before - but now it is applied to a better view. The thinking tools, like the PMI, perform the function of the spectacles in allowing us to see more clearly and more broadly. We then react to what we see.

One thirteen-year-old girl told how at first she thought the PMI was very artificial since she already knew what she felt about a subject. She then told how, when she had, nevertheless, put points down under P and M and I, she found herself reacting to what she had put down and her feelings changed. That is exactly what one would hope to achieve. Once an idea has been thought and put down under any of the headings, that idea cannot be 'unthought' and it will come to influence the final decision.

On one occasion one boy said that for yellow cars it would be a 'Plus' point that they would need to be kept cleaner. Another boy declared that the cleanliness was actually a 'Minus' point since he 'had to clean his Dad's car'. Both were right. The boy who saw the cleanliness point when looking in

the Plus direction was correct. The boy who saw the cleanliness point when looking in the Minus direction was also correct. In the PMI we are not looking at the values that reside within the point itself. It is **NOT** a value judgement. We look to see what points are to be seen when we look in one direction or another. This difference is vitally important.

One girl looks towards the south and sees a church spire. Another girl in a different part of the countryside looks towards the north and sees the same church spire. Is the church a north church or a south church? Clearly it is both. It is exactly the same with the PMI. 'P' represents a scanning direction in the same way as 'north' does. We look in that direction and see what we see, we note what we see. Then we look in the next direction. The intention is solely to scan effectively - **NOT** to assign values.

Some people ask me whether it is in order to go through the points as they arise and then to judge each one and dump it in a category box called 'Plus' or a box called 'Minus' or another one called 'Interesting'. This is quite wrong and defeats the whole purpose of the PMI. To judge the points as they arise is a judgement exercise. To **LOOK** in one direction after another is a scanning exercise. It is even conceivable that the chemistry of the brain is slightly different when we set out to look in a 'Plus' or positive direction from what it might be when we look in the 'Minus' or negative direction. Because it illustrates scanning so well, the PMI is almost a miniature thinking course just by itself. Always keep the PMI sequence in that order (Plus points first, then Minus, then Interesting).

EXERCISES ON PMI

Because the PMI seems so very simple its effectiveness should not be underestimated. I have seen it used to turn a fiercely emotional meeting from prejudice towards consideration of the subject. Once perception is directed in a certain direction it cannot help but see, and once seen something cannot be unseen.

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For practice a PMI can be done on each of the six practice items listed here. Three minutes should be allowed for the whole PMI in each case. The items can be done on one's own or in a small discussion group.

1. What do you think of the suggestion that everyone should wear a badge showing his or her mood?
2. Should every child adopt an old person to look after?
3. Are weekend prisons for young offenders a good idea?
4. Should everyone be allowed to indicate where they would like their taxes spent?
5. Should VCRs contain a special chip that does not permit violent videos to be shown?
6. Should cars be banned from city centers?
7. In many countries there is an increasing number of old people. There is a suggestion that there should be a specific political party representing people over sixty years old. Do a PMI on this suggestion.
8. A few companies have started a system in which each executive at the beginning of the day can press a button to light a green or red light against his name on a board. The red light means that he is busy and stressed and does not want to be bothered. The green light means he is full of energy and ready for anything. Do a PMI on this idea. Do another PMI on this idea applied to a family - each member of the family would have a choice of the two lights every day.

9. Some cities have tried free white bicycles which belong to everyone. You pick up a bicycle and use it and then leave it for someone else to use. Do a PMI on this idea.

10. Suppose that telepathy worked and that you could tell exactly what other people were thinking when they were thinking about you. Do a PMI on this. Is it a good idea?

11. Should students vote on their teachers every year at school and give the teachers a rating? Do a PMI on this idea.

12. Some factories are trying a four-day working week in which people work for ten hours a day on four days and then have three days off. Do a PMI on this. Decide whether you think it is a good idea.

13. A mother thinks that her children are watching too much TV so she puts a coin box on the TV set and anyone who wants to watch must pay per hour. Do a PMI on this idea.

14. What do you think of the idea that for one full week each year the children should run the house completely - including shopping, cooking, cleaning etc.? Do a PMI.