Realistic Lateral Thinking Problems

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A librarian used a book he had never read to destroy thousands of other books. How was this possible? This simple riddle or lateral thinking puzzle relies on the idea of a "librarian" and "never read" to encourage you assume that it is all about the kinds of books you read. Get away from that assumption and you might stumble upon the solution - that he used a book of matches to burn all the others.

Such puzzles are good mental exercise, and fun as well, but not all lateral thinking problems are word play or simple puzzles. Many are designed to require or encourage creative thinking about more realistic scenarios. They often have many possible solutions.

{bot_wrgoogle}You may not like the inconclusive nature of this kind of puzzle or problem - at least at first. It is common to want one definitive solution, so you know you're "right" once you have come to a conclusion. But the more open-ended lateral thinking problems are just as good for exercising your creativity, and the thinking skills developed from working on them may be more applicable to real life situations, where there is rarely one definitive solution.

Situational Lateral Thinking Problems

In these problems, there is usually a scenario or situation which is explained, and a goal to accomplish. For example, suppose you need to get a basketball out of a 12-foot deep pit that has smooth cement for the floor and walls. It is square, about four feet per side. You are alone, and have only what you are wearing, plus what is in your pockets. Using nothing else, how can you get the basketball out?

This is a lateral thinking problem because it requires you to think "laterally." This means coming at problems from other angles, as opposed to the more traditional linear or logical approaches. In this case, it means using what you have in ways that these things are not normally used.

For example, you might make a "basket" of your t-shirt, tying shoelaces to the four corners. Then you could unravel the threads from your socks to make a string that would lower the shirt. The idea would be to move the basketball onto it and then pull it up. Moving the ball might be accomplished with a shoe hung on the end of a string made of strips of clothing, which you use to "kick" the ball into the right place.

Another solution: A piece of paper from your pocket might be chewed and dropped onto the ball using shoe laces and clothing for a string. When it dries it would perhaps "glue" the line to the ball, so it could be pulled up. A tall person might "chimney" his body up and down the pit to get the ball, as climbers do with rock walls that are a few feet apart. There are undoubtedly other possibilities here.

Life itself presents us with many lateral thinking problems, at least if we look at situations the right way. For example, a judge in a Michigan child custody case went beyond the traditional thinking about how much time the children would spend at each parent's house. Instead, he decided that the children would stay right where they were in the home they knew, and the parents would move in with them on alternating weeks. That's a good example of applying lateral thinking to real life problems.