



Future Trends

Divergent versus Convergent Thinking

How do you think? The answer to this question may very well determine your future success in the mortgage business.

By Roger Gudobba

Thinking skills are the intellectual skills such as the skills of memorizing and recalling facts and information, clarifying, making analysis, generating ideas, making decisions, problem solving, and planning. Last month's article on "Brainstorming and Creative Thinking" addressed the methodology developed by IDEO and the process for creative thinking, sometimes referred to as divergent thinking. The opposite of divergent thinking would be convergent thinking. Are you confused yet? I understand that this all may sound a bit complicated, but in actuality it is fairly simple. You also may be wondering how this relates to the mortgage industry. I promise, I'm getting there. Let's define these terms a little better first.

Divergent thinking is considered "thinking outside the box" where the imagination runs wild and the possibilities are endless. It starts with a task or problem and considers all the ways you can accomplish that task without thinking in specifics. Instead of a single correct answer, there may be a whole host of new perspectives and possibilities. An idea is followed in several directions to lead to one or more new ideas, which in turn leads to still more ideas. It involves having a different idea that works as well or better than previous ideas. Brainstorming is a structured form of divergent thinking.

To provide an example that hits close to home, let's think about rising interest rates and how that impacts lenders. When rates rise, purchase business, as opposed to refinance business, also rises. So, today lenders are focused on creating a more meaningful relationship with new borrowers to get their share of that new purchase business. A divergent thinker might create a marketing strategy that includes a Twitter account as a way to reach more borrowers where they live in a social setting. Using social media to chat with borrowers about topics like the weather or politics won't result

in an immediate mortgage, but it will familiarize the lender with a swath of borrowers that they might not meet otherwise. Who would have thought that you can bring in business by talking to random people on Twitter about everyday topics? In actuality, you can do just

Thinking outside the box: Divergent thinking allows us to use our imagination to explore all sorts of new possibilities.

that if you're a divergent thinker.

Convergent thinking is considered "thinking inside the box" where we focus on a common task or solution. You gather facts and information, analyze, filter, judge, select and eliminate ideas to find the best ones to use in relation to the task at hand. This is an attempt to bring thoughts from different directions into a union or common conclusion.

To go back to my prior example in which we pondered how the divergent thinker might get more purchase business through the creative use of Twitter, the convergent thinker might take a different path. The convergent thinker will analyze the company's point-of-sale, evaluate prominent point-of-sale technology vendors and select a new frontend system that gives that lender a more user-friendly website to make it more desirable for new borrowers to transact with the lender online.

Both forms of thinking can be positive. That positive impact can be made even greater when thinkers collaborate. Collaborative thinking flows in one of two distinct directions: 1) it can diverge outward, in a broad, multidirectional, expansive exploration of ideas; or 2) it can con-

verge inward, narrowing focus in an effort to judge, select and eliminate ideas. The two styles of thinking are very powerful when used sequentially. However, if they take place simultaneously they will quickly become an obstacle to success.

At first glance, divergent thinking might seem to be more creative than convergent thinking, but both are essential. Each of the two thinking processes has an important role to play. Maybe the best way in which convergent thinking may be combined with divergent thinking is to engage in divergent thinking in order to generate many novel ideas, and then to evaluate these ideas by using convergent thinking. An understanding of both of these types of collaborative thinking will have a profound impact on your ultimate success.

Now, let's explore this in the world of the software community. In actuality, most people don't consider the thought process when developing software applications.

Convergent thinking is our normal state. When developers design software solutions they use convergent thinking almost exclusively. They tend to be analytical and judgmental in their thinking process. They have a tendency to focus on the choices that they wish to implement and ignore or reject evidence that conflicts with those choices.

Thinking inside the box:
Convergent thinking allows us to use our knowledge to examine concepts and see where they fit.

On the other hand, divergent thinking would allow the development group to generate as many ideas as possible in a very short timeframe. In this environment, all parties are encouraged to search for a high quantity of ideas, and are not just looking for quality ideas. Anything and everything is possible. There really is no such thing as a bad idea. During this process, all judgment is suspended and no criticism is allowed. Yet many consider this a waste of time and effort. In an article, John Paul Mueller stated, "In short, divergent thinking is a necessary part of software design, which many companies avoid today to their detriment. The best way to look at this pro-

cess is that you diverge from the task to explore all possible ways to accomplish it and then, after careful consideration, converge in a set of solutions that yield the finished application."

The typical software development has 5 phases. (1) The initiative starts with the definition of require-



ments for the project. It may be a new product or an upgrade to an existing solution. (2) The design phase sets the specific tasks for the project. (3) The development phase is where the actual coding is completed. In some cases, the developer may have little input or control over the specifications and design as the project may already be defined. (4) The testing phase or debugging phase may uncover some deficiencies and necessitate some modifications to the requirements. Going back to Phase 1 could involve significant changes and rework resulting in missed deadlines and a solution does not meet the intended goal or outcome. (5) The implementation phase is the final phase.

Recently the concept of sprints has evolved where you break the design down into smaller parts and independently perform Phases 2 through 4 on each sprint. This is more manageable and a requirement change in an individual sprint may not impact the other sprints.

In the example of software development, divergent thinking will have the greatest impact in Phase 1. Before defining requirements you identify the need. With a cross section of roles, responsibilities and expertise, the brainstorming session will uncover a number of possibilities. As the group converges on a solution you will be able to visualize the complete picture and hopefully significantly reduce the potential of rework and delays. Too often we think of things as black or white. I don't have to tell you that is not the case. In my view, mortgage lenders and technology vendors can benefit from using a bit of divergent thinking. ❖