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Convergent vs. divergent thinking: Finding the right balance for creative problem solving



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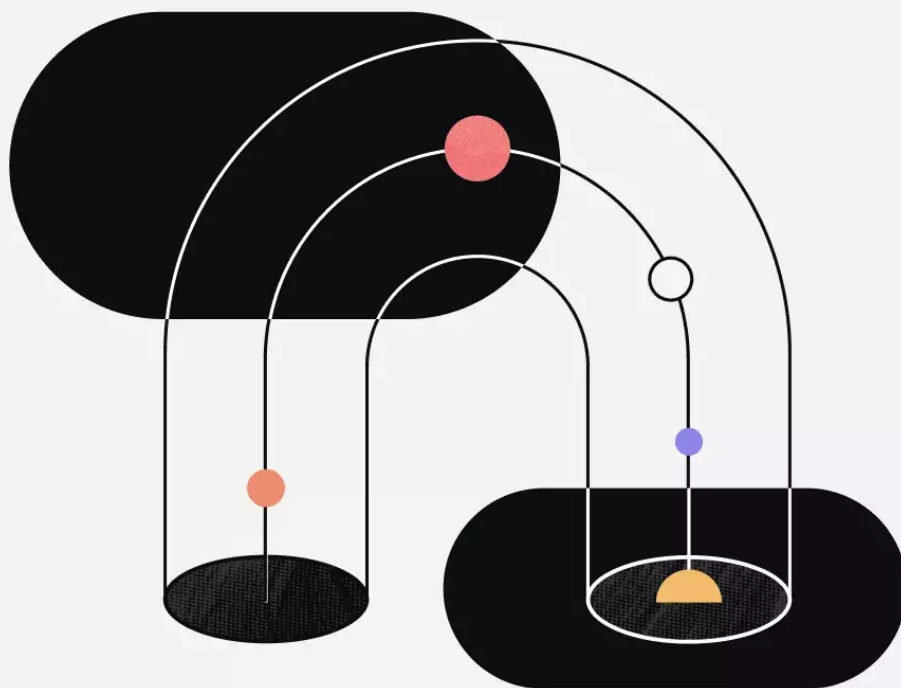
Summary

Convergent thinking focuses on finding one well-defined solution to a problem. Divergent thinking is the opposite of convergent thinking and involves more creativity. In this piece, we'll explain the differences between convergent and divergent thinking in the problem-solving process. We'll also discuss the importance of using both types of thinking to improve your decision making.

Have you ever taken a personality test like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator? If so, you've likely answered a bunch of questions for an algorithm to tell you how you interact with the world around you. One thing this test will tell you is if you make decisions more objectively (thinkers) or decisions more subjectively (feelers).

Convergent and divergent thinking resemble that aspect of the Myers-Briggs test. While you may naturally be more analytical or creative, you can learn to think in both ways. In this piece, we'll explain the differences between convergent and divergent thinking in the problem-solving process. We'll also discuss the importance of using both types of thinking to

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What is the difference between convergent and divergent thinking?

J. P. Guilford, a psychologist, created the terms convergent and divergent thinking in 1956. Convergent thinking focuses on reaching one well-defined solution to a problem. This type of thinking is best suited for tasks that involve logic as opposed to creativity, such as answering multiple-choice tests or solving a problem where you know there are no other possible solutions.

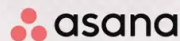
Divergent thinking is the opposite of convergent thinking and involves more creativity. With this type of thinking, you can generate ideas and develop multiple solutions to a problem. While divergent thinking often involves brainstorming for many possible answers to a question, the goal is the same as convergent thinking—to arrive at the best solution.

Convergent vs. divergent thinking

Convergent vs. Divergent Thinking

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reaching one, well-defined solution to a problem, while **divergent thinking** involves more creativity and accepts multiple solutions to a problem.



In practice, here's what these different types of thinking might look like:

- **Convergent thinking:** If the copy machine breaks at work, a convergent thinker would call a technician right away to fix the copy machine.
- **Divergent thinking:** If the copy machine breaks at work, a divergent thinker would try to determine the cause of the copy machine's malfunction and assess various ways to fix the problem. One option may be to call a technician, while other options may include looking up a DIY video on YouTube or sending a company-wide email to see if any team members have experience with fixing copy machines. They would then determine which solution is most suitable.

Convergent thinking in project management

You may use convergent thinking in project management without being aware of it. Because convergent thinking embraces structure and clear solutions, it's natural for project managers to lean toward this approach. The benefits of convergent thinking include:

- A quicker way to arrive at a solution
- Leaves no room for ambiguity

- Encourages organization and linear processes

There's nothing wrong with using convergent thinking to align teams, create workflows, and plan projects. There are many instances in project management when you must reach solutions quickly. However, if you completely avoid divergent thinking, you'll have trouble developing innovative solutions to problems.

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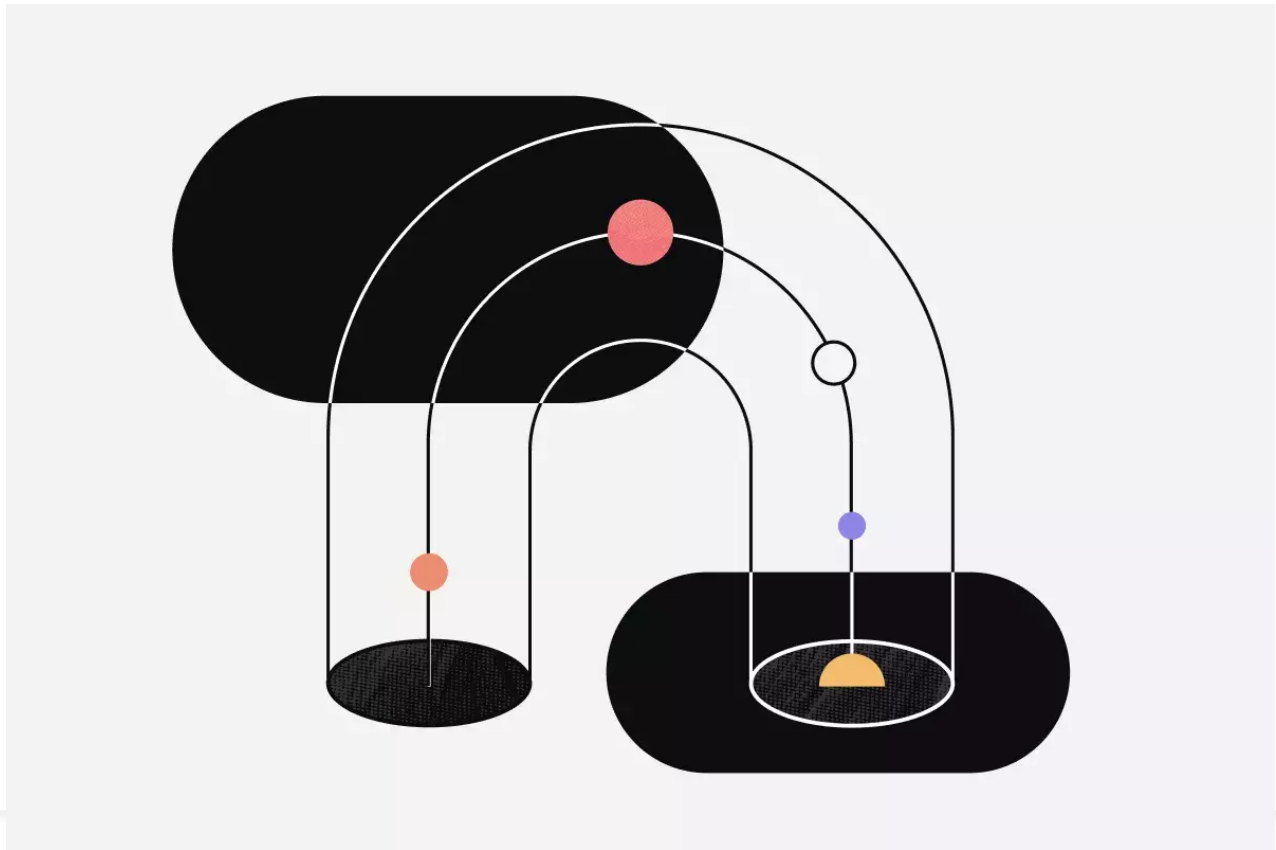
The benefits of divergent thinking

It can be difficult as a busy project manager to slow down and think divergently. Projects have deadlines and it's important to make decisions quickly. You may think that if you don't come up with a solution right away, you'll disappoint your clients or customers.

However, working too quickly can also cause you to make decisions within your comfort zone instead of taking risks. Divergent thinking can benefit you as a project manager because you'll adopt a learning mindset. Divergent thinking can also help you:

- Identify new opportunities
- Find creative ways to solve problems
- Assess ideas from multiple perspectives
- Understand and learn from others

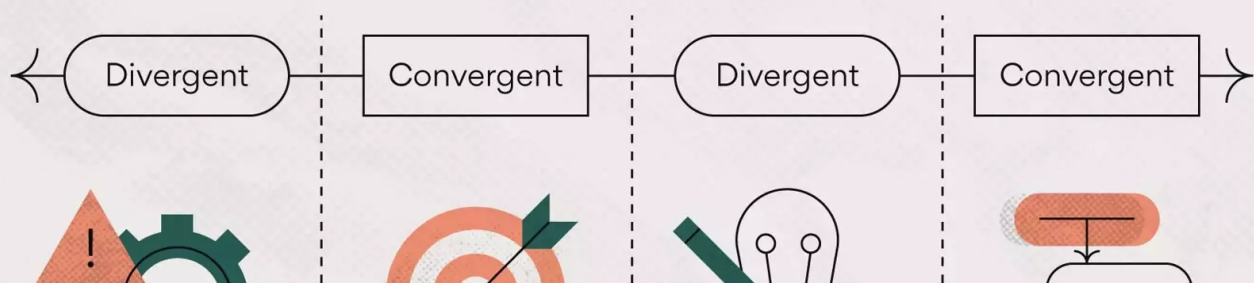
Fast results and predictability may work some of the time, but this way of thinking won't help you stand out from competitors. You'll need divergent thinking to impress clients or customers and set yourself apart from others.



Use convergent and divergent thinking for creative problem solving

You can use a mix of convergent and divergent thinking to solve problems in your processes or projects. Without using both types of thinking, you'll have a harder time getting from point A to point B.

The creative cycle of convergent and divergent thinking





1. Discover: Divergent thinking

The first stage of creative problem solving is discovery, and in this stage, you'll need to use divergent thinking. When you have a problem at work, the first step is to discover the cause of the problem by considering all of the possibilities.

For example, you may have had multiple projects run over budget. This begs the question: *Why does this keep happening?* If you used convergent thinking to answer this question, you might jump straight to a conclusion about why these budget overruns are happening. But when you use divergent thinking, you consider all possible causes of the problem.

Possible causes of budget overruns may include:

- Lack of communication between team members
- Improper allocation of resources
- Poor project planning
- Projects taking longer than expected

Now that you have all the possible causes of your problem, you can move on to the next stage of creative problem solving, which is to define your cause.

2. Define: Convergent thinking

Use convergent thinking when narrowing down the potential causes of your problem. While it's possible that more than one cause led to your budget overruns, convergent thinking requires a focused approach to solving your problem, so you'll need to choose the cause you think is most problematic.

Lack of communication may have contributed to your budget overruns, but if poor project planning played a bigger role in your budget woes, then it's the cause you should go with. When you create a solution to your project planning procedure, it can result in better budgeting. Most causes are also inter-linked. So better planning will improve workplace communication even if it wasn't the primary goal.

3. Deduce: Divergent thinking

In stage three, you'll switch back to divergent thinking as you work to find a solution for your problem. If the cause of your budget overruns is poor project planning, then possible solutions may include:

- Use a project plan template
- Better communication with stakeholders
- More thorough research of project requirements
- Implement cost control methods

You must consider all possible solutions to your problem before you can land on the best solution.

4. Determine: Convergent thinking

The last stage of problem solving is when you'll use convergent thinking once again to determine which solution will most effectively eliminate your problem. While all

the solutions you came up with in stage three may solve your problem to some degree, you should begin with one action item to address. In some instances, you may focus on more than one action item, but only do so if these items are related.

For example, after discussing the possible solutions with your team, you decide that adding cost control methods to your cost management plan should prevent budget overruns and may even help you save money.

How to be a more divergent thinker

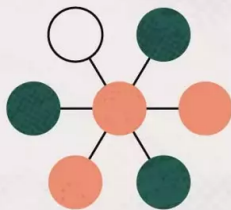
Becoming a more divergent thinker will help you exercise both sides of your brain and ensure you see problems from every angle. The following strategies can stimulate divergent thinking:

5 ways to improve your divergent thinking



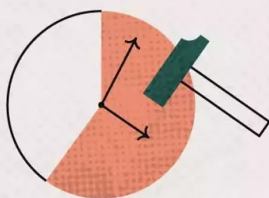
1. Think about your thinking process

If you're naturally a convergent thinker, make a mindful effort to think divergently.



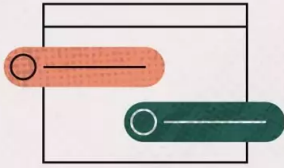
2. Try brainstorming and mind mapping

Use strategies that will inspire you to think outside the box and come up with new ideas or solutions.



3. Free yourself from time constraints

Remove the pressure of deadlines that entice you to skip straight to convergent thinking.



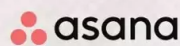
4. Use work management software

Use software that encourages flexibility and teamwork so you can create and share ideas.



5. Get curious and take risks

Don't be afraid to steer away from traditional processes for a chance of a big reward.



1. Think about your thinking process

Sometimes the best strategy is the simplest one. When you're mindful about thinking divergently, it becomes easier to do. Try putting notes up in your office or adding steps in your processes that encourage divergent thinking.

Steps that encourage divergent thinking may include:

- Require at least a one-hour break before sending emails regarding big decisions
- Before making a big decision, put yourself in the shoes of other team members and consider their perspectives
- Don't make big decisions without vetting your decision with at least two people

By taking active steps to think about your thinking, you may realize that divergent thinking comes more naturally.

2. Try brainstorming and mind mapping

Brainstorming and mind mapping are two strategies that inspire divergent thinking because they help you think outside the box and generate new ideas. Mind mapping is a form of brainstorming in which you diagram tasks, words, concepts, or items that link to a central concept. This diagram helps you visualize your thoughts and generate ideas without worrying about structure.

You can also brainstorm in other ways. Other divergent thinking brainstorming techniques include:

- **Starbursting:** Starbursting is a visual brainstorming technique where you put an idea on the middle of a whiteboard and draw a six-point star around it. Each point will represent the questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how?
- **SWOT analysis:** SWOT analysis can be used for strategic planning and brainstorming. You can use it to vet the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of an idea.
- **Lightning decision jam:** Known as LDJ for short, this brainstorming technique begins with writing down positives about a topic or what's working regarding the topic, then writing down negatives and identifying what needs to be addressed most urgently.

Try group brainstorming sessions to get fresh ideas and solutions. If you perform these sessions regularly, you may find them enjoyable and crucial for creative problem solving.

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3. Free yourself from time constraints

Everyone has deadlines they must meet. But if you're making an important decision or trying to solve a crucial problem, try to get rid of those strict time constraints so you don't feel pressured to skip straight to a convergent thinking approach.

Some techniques you can use to relieve pressure caused by deadlines include:

- Request a meeting agenda in advance so you have time to prepare.
- Use timeboxing to come up with multiple ideas in 5-10 minute intervals.
- Set personal deadlines before official deadlines to give yourself some wiggle room.

It's understandable to feel rushed to find the correct answer in a high-pressure work environment, but you won't know that your answer is the correct one without taking the time to consider all possible solutions.

4. Use work management software

Work management is an approach to organizing projects, processes, and routine tasks in order to provide clarity to your team so they can hit their goals faster. Work management software, like Asana, can benefit both types of thinking.

If you're having trouble with divergent thinking in particular, there are certain features of the software you may find most useful. Work management software can stimulate divergent thinking by allowing you to:

- Collaborate with others on projects
- Share ideas and feedback quickly
- Make changes at the click of a button

Keeping your projects online is also important because your team can work together regardless of whether they work remotely or in the office.

5. Get curious and take risks

Sometimes team members settle into convergent thinking habits because they're afraid of taking risks. While it's important to prevent project risks when possible, you shouldn't be afraid to steer away from traditional processes and think outside of the box.

The best project managers can switch between convergent and divergent thinking depending on whether a situation requires a quick and structured solution or an open mind. Not every situation requires subjectivity, but you'll often need to use a mix of convergent and divergent thinking to be a successful leader.

Develop creative ideas with convergent and divergent thinking

We all have a natural cognitive approach to creative problem solving, and there's nothing wrong with sticking to your guns. But if you want to inspire idea generation and solve problems in the best way possible, then you must use both convergent and divergent thinking.

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