Better Thinking for Better Meetings!

Lateral Thinking
&
The Six Thinking Hats Approach

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Six Thinking Hats
Looking at an Idea/Decision From All Points of View

Look at decisions from many angles, with James Manktelow & Amy Carlsen.

'Six Thinking Hats' is an important and powerful technique. It is used to look at ideas/decisions from a number of important perspectives. This forces you to move outside your habitual thinking style, and helps you to get a more rounded view of a situation.

This tool was created by Edward de Bono in his book 'Six Thinking Hats'.

Many successful people think from a very rational, positive viewpoint. This is part of the reason that they are successful. Often, though, they may fail to look at a problem from an emotional, intuitive, creative or negative viewpoint. This can mean that they underestimate resistance to plans, fail to make creative leaps and do not make essential contingency plans.

Similarly, pessimists may be excessively defensive, and more emotional people may fail to look at decisions calmly and rationally.

Western culture assumes conversation must be one of advocacy and criticism (argumentative). This approach creates adversarial discussions involving the ego of advocates. It shuts down conversion and reduces engagement and inclusion. "Six Thinking Hats uses a "parallel thinking approach that broadens the discussion to more facets and creates a more "robust" discussion.

If you look at a problem with the 'Six Thinking Hats' technique, you will solve it using all approaches. Your decisions and plans will mix ambition, skill in execution, public sensitivity, creativity and good contingency planning.

How to Use the Tool

You can use Six Thinking Hats in meetings or on your own. In meetings it has the benefit of blocking the confrontations that happen when people with different thinking styles discuss the same problem.

Each 'Thinking Hat' is a different style of thinking. These are explained below:

- **White Hat:**
  With this thinking hat you focus on the data available. Look at the information you have, and see what you can learn from it. Look for gaps in your knowledge, and either try to fill them or take account of them.
  This is where you analyze past trends, and try to extrapolate from historical data.

- **Red Hat:**
  'Wearing' the red hat, you look at problems using intuition, gut reaction, and emotion. Also try to think how other people will react emotionally. Try to understand the responses of people who do not fully know your reasoning.

- **Black Hat:**
  Using black hat thinking, look at all the bad points of the decision. Look at it cautiously and defensively. Try to see why it might not work. This is important because it highlights the weak points in a plan. It allows you to eliminate them, alter them, or prepare contingency plans to counter them.

  Black Hat thinking helps to make your plans 'tougher' and more resilient. It can also help you to spot fatal flaws and risks before you embark on a course of action. Black Hat thinking is one of the real benefits of this technique, as many successful people get so used to thinking positively that often they cannot see problems in advance. This leaves them under-prepared for difficulties.

- **Yellow Hat:**
  The yellow hat helps you to think positively. It is the optimistic viewpoint that helps you to see all the benefits of the decision and the value in it. Yellow Hat thinking helps you to keep going when everything looks gloomy and difficult.
• **Green Hat:**
The Green Hat stands for creativity. This is where you can develop creative solutions to a problem. It is a freewheeling way of thinking, in which there is little criticism of ideas. A whole range of creativity tools can help you here.

• **Blue Hat:**
The Blue Hat stands for discussion focus or process control. This is the hat worn by people chairing or facilitating meetings. When running into difficulties because ideas are running dry, they may direct activity into Green Hat thinking. When contingency plans are needed, they will ask for Black Hat thinking, etc.

A variant of this technique is to look at problems from the point of view of different professionals (e.g. doctors, architects, sales directors, etc.) or different customers.

**Case Example**

The directors of a property company are looking at whether they should construct a new office building. The economy is doing well, and the amount of vacant office space is reducing sharply. As part of their decision they decide to use the *6 Thinking Hats* technique during a planning meeting.

Looking at the problem with the **White Hat**, they analyze the data they have. They examine the trend in vacant office space, which shows a sharp reduction. They anticipate that by the time the office block would be completed, that there will be a severe shortage of office space. Current government projections show steady economic growth for at least the construction period.

With **Red Hat** thinking, some of the directors think the proposed building looks quite ugly. While it would be highly cost-effective, they worry that people would not like to work in it.

When they think with the **Black Hat**, they worry that government projections may be wrong. The economy may be about to enter a 'cyclical downturn', in which case the office building may be empty for a long time. If the building is not attractive, then companies will choose to work in another better-looking building at the same rent.

With the **Yellow Hat**, however, if the economy holds up and their projections are correct, the company stands to make a great deal of money. If they are lucky, maybe they could sell the building before the next downturn, or rent to tenants on long-term leases that will last through any recession.

With **Green Hat** thinking they consider whether they should change the design to make the building more pleasant. Perhaps they could build prestige offices that people would want to rent in any economic climate. Alternatively, maybe they should invest the money in the short term to buy up property at a low cost when a recession comes.

The **Blue Hat** has been used by the meeting's Chair to move among the different thinking styles. He or she may have needed to keep other members of the team from switching styles, or from criticizing other peoples' points.

**Key Points**

De Bono's Six Thinking Hats is a good technique for looking at the effects of an idea/decision from a number of different points of view.

It allows necessary emotion and skepticism to be brought into what would otherwise be purely rational decisions. It opens up the opportunity for creativity within Decision Making. The technique also helps, for example, persistently pessimistic people to be positive and creative. It is a more robust discussion technique because it is more engaging and inclusive of diverse opinions while shifting the focus away from individual egos.

Plans or decisions developed using the '6 Thinking Hats' technique will be sounder and more resilient than would otherwise be the case. It may also help you to avoid public relations mistakes, and spot good reasons not to follow a course of action before you have committed to it.

**Sources**

Mindtools. This web site has extensive materials on meeting management, process improvement, leadership and other topics.
http://www.mindtools.com/

It is well worth reading Edward de Bono's book entitled *6 Thinking Hats* for more information on this technique. www.debonogroup.com/six_thinking_hats.php. The book is also available through online book retailers.
# 6 Thinking Hats Job Aid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hat</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Discussion Questions</th>
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| White Hat  
Facts, Information, Data | • Look at the data or information available and see what can be learned from it.  
• Look for gaps in knowledge and either try to fill them or take account of them.  
• Analyze past trends, and try to extrapolate from historical data. | What information/facts do we know? What information is missing?  
What information/facts would we like to have?  
How are we going to get the missing information?  
What is relevant? What is most important? How valid is this?  
Let’s examine the facts, figures, and information. Note all information, formal and informal. |
| Yellow Hat  
Benefits | • Helps you/group to think from a positive/optimistic viewpoint.  
• Pursue a logical positive view of things.  
• Discuss the feasibility or opportunities.  
• It helps to see all the benefits of a decision/idea and the value.  
• Yellow Hat thinking helps you to keep going when everything looks gloomy and difficult. | What are the good points?  
What are the values or benefits each idea offers?  
Why will this idea work? Why is it worth doing?  
How will it help us? Why can it be done? |
| Black Hat  
Risks & Cautions | • Look at things pessimistically, cautiously and defensively.  
• Use a judgement, logic, and/or evidence approach.  
• Focus on the consequences.  
• See why ideas and approaches might not work.  
• Highlights the weak points in a plan or course of action.  
• Prepare contingency plans to counter problems that arise.  
*Reality Check: What Black Hat is not: Negativity.* | Is this true? Will it work?  
What are the weaknesses or shortcomings?  
What is wrong with it?  
What might go wrong?  
What risks are we taking?  
Why do we think this might fail?  
Why should we be cautious? |
| Green Hat  
Idea Generation | • Focus on creativity and innovation.  
• Put forth new ideas, options and alternatives.  
• Develop creative solutions to a problem.  
• A freewheeling way of thinking, in which there is little criticism of ideas.  
• A specific time is set out for everyone to make a creative effort. | What are the possible ways to work this out? Or innovate?  
What are some other ways to solve the problem?  
What ideas can spring from our strategies, values, or creativity?  
What new or different ideas can we generate?  
What suggestions, alternatives, or enhancements do people have?  
What kind of proposal can we make? |
| Red Hat  
Feelings, Intuition, Emotion | • Focus on emotions and feelings and the non-rational aspect of thinking.  
• Opportunity to express feelings, emotions, intuition or hunches without any need to explain or to justify them.  
*The Red Hat is the opposite of White Hat which is neutral, objective and free of emotions. No need to justify feelings.* | How do I feel about this right now?  
How cold or warm do I feel about this?  
How am I reacting to this?  
What feelings, intuitions, and or hunches do I have? |
| Blue Hat  
Thinking About Thinking/Process | • This hat is worn by the person(s) facilitating the meeting.  
• The hat sets the focus, guides the group in presenting and sharing information, obtains consensus on the sequence of hats (or the discussion), and determines the thinking tasks.  
• Blue Hat ensures the ground rules are observed. | What is our agenda? Who needs to be at the meeting? What will we focus on?  
What order of hats should we use? Should we change hats? What have we done so far? What do we do next? What decision(s) or conclusions have we reached? What actions do we take? How much time do we need? What stakeholders are affected? |
## Multiple Thinking Hats — Guide To Possible Sequences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Framework</th>
<th>Hat Sequence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Meeting Sequence</td>
<td>Confirm the discussion process (Blue)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Present the facts, information, or scenario (White)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Generate ideas on how the case could be handled, alternatives (Green)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Evaluate the merits of the ideas — List benefits and values (Yellow)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>List drawbacks or cautions (Do not overuse!!) (Black)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Obtain everybody’s gut feelings, hunches about the alternatives (Red)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summarize (Blue)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assess an Idea</td>
<td>Yellow + Black</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improve a Design</td>
<td>Blue + Green + Red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop Alternatives</td>
<td>Blue + Green + Red</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caution</td>
<td>White + Black + Blue + Red</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comparing Facts &amp; Opinion</td>
<td>Red + White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Yellow + Black + Green + Red +</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparing &amp; Synthesizing</td>
<td>Black + Yellow + Green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Planning</td>
<td>White + Blue</td>
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*Based on Six Thinking Hats by Dr. Edward de Bono*
Case Example: All Weather Bike

Background
You are an employee of a transportation business and participating on a work group. Your work group needs to make a recommendation about a new product idea-proceed or not proceed. Previously your group was involved in a brainstorming exercise. A number of new product ideas were identified (without much detail). One idea was to create an “All Weather Bike.”

Your job is to meet as a group and discuss the characteristics and potential for sales. Your group has no constraints-e.g. money is not a limiting factor. The recommendation(s) will be presented to management at a later date.

Use the Six Thinking Hats approach in the following sequence:

1. Blue Hat
2. Green Hat
3. Red Hat
4. Yellow Hat
5. Black Hat

“Wear” only one hat at a time to keep your discussion focused.

Charge: What is the design of the bike? How will you market an “All Weather Bike.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue Hat</td>
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Exercise: Outer Space Creature

Instructions

Please imagine a creature living on another planet with a different atmosphere. In fact, this planet isn't even in our solar system. It might be an imaginary planet, so it's very different from earth. What kind of creature might live on such a planet with an atmosphere so different from ours?

Draw your “critter” in the box below.