Edward De Bono's Six Thinking Hats

Looking at a decision from all points of view

'Six Thinking Hats' is a powerful technique that helps you look at important decisions from a number of different perspectives. It helps you make better decisions by forcing you to move outside your habitual ways of thinking. As such, it helps you understand the full complexity of the decision, and spot issues and opportunities to which you might otherwise be blind.

These **Hats** represent six thinking strategies, as identified by Edward de Bono. He considered human cognition and thought to be of several types, approaches, or orientations. He theorized that of these approaches, most people used only one or two of the approaches and that people developed thinking habits which in turn limited people to those approaches. de Bono believed that if the various approaches could be identified and a system of their use developed which could be taught, that people could be more productive in meetings and in collaborating within groups and teams by deliberately using the approaches.

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.

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

Unbundling thinking

When we think in the normal way, we try to do too much at once. We may be looking at the information, forming ideas, and judging someone else's ideas all at the same time.

The Six Hats method allows us to unbundle thinking. Instead of trying to do everything at once, we separate out the different aspects of thinking. This way we can pay full attention to each aspect in turn. Think of full-color printing, where the basic color separations are made and then each basic color is printed separately onto the same sheet to give full-color printing. In the same way, we separate the modes of thinking and then apply each mode to the same subject in order to end up with full-color thinking on the subject.

- 🔔 White hat (Blank sheet): Information & reports, facts and figures (*objective*)
- 🔔 Red hat (Fire): Intuition, opinion & emotion, feelings (*subjective*)
- 🔔 Yellow hat (Sun): Praise, positive aspects, why it will work (*objective*)
- 🔔 Black hat (Judge's robe): Criticism, judgment, negative aspects, modus tollens (*objective*)
- 🔔 Green hat (Plant): Alternatives, new approaches & 'everything goes', idea generation & provocations (*speculative/creative*)
- 🔔 Blue hat (Sky): "Big Picture," "Conductor hat," "Meta hat," "thinking about thinking", overall process (*overview*)

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.

- **Blue Hat:**
  The Blue Hat stands for process control. This is the hat worn by people chairing 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.

Edward de Bono's book *Six Thinking Hats* provides more information on this technique.

Illustrative Examples

Issue 1:
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 between 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.

Issue 2
Students are talking while their teacher is talking

White hat – factual (state the facts)
- Students are talking while the teacher is talking
- There is noise and therefore other students are distracted and can't hear the teacher
- Students don't know what to do once instructions are given
- Many students become distracted and off task resulting in the failure to complete work

Red Hat – emotional (state the emotions)
- The teacher feels offended
- Students become frustrated because they can't hear directions
- Those talking enjoy joking around and being heard.

Black Hat – critical (negative aspects)
- Time is wasted
- Learning is compromised
- Those speaking feel that listeners do not respect them and do not wish to hear what they are saying
- irritable

Yellow hat – positive (positive aspects)
- Everyone is able to say what is on their minds
- It can be fun
- Not only the 'smart kids' get to speak
- One doesn't have to wait to share their ideas and therefore risk forgetting information

Green hat – creative (creative ideas that originate as a result of seeing information in a new light)
- Teacher will be more aware about the amount of time they spend talking
- Teacher will try to incorporate interaction from a variety of different students rather than just the 'smart kids'
- Students will resist the urge to say whatever is on their mind. They will think about what they have to say and whether it is relevant to the topic
- Students will take into account whether their comment will interfere with other people's learning

Blue hat – process control (ensure each hat gets used effectively/the big picture)
- Teacher learns that they need to monitor the amount of time that they spend talking within the classroom
- Teacher needs to involve all students within discussions
- Teacher needs to recognize that some students need thinking time before responding. Allowing these students time to compute solutions promotes wider participation and increased learning
- Students realize that their talking makes the speaker feel unappreciated and disrespected
- Students realize that their comments are jeopardizing the learning of other individuals
- Students realize that talking out of time demonstrates a lack of self-discipline and that not all comments require sharing

Summary

Six Thinking Hats is a good technique for looking at the effects of a 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.

Plans 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.

Utilizing a variety of approaches within thinking and problem solving allows the issue to be addressed from a variety of angles, thus servicing the needs of all individuals concerned. The thinking hats are useful for learners as they illustrate the need for individuals to address problems from a variety of different angles. They also aid learners as they allow the individual to recognize any deficiencies in the way that they approach problem solving, thus allowing them to rectify such issues.

de Bono believed that the key to a successful use of the Six Think Hats methodology was the deliberate focusing of the discussion on a particular approach as needed during the meeting or collaboration session. For instance, a meeting may be called to review a particular problem and to develop a solution for the problem. The Six Thinking Hats method could then be used in a sequence to first of all explore the problem, then develop a set of solutions, and to finally choose a solution through critical examination of the solution set.

So the meeting may start with everyone assuming the **Blue** hat to discuss how the meeting will be conducted and to develop the goals and objectives. The discussion may then move to **Red** hat thinking in order to collect opinions and reactions to the problem. This phase may also be used to develop constraints for the actual solution such as who will be affected by the problem and/or solutions. Next the discussion may move to the (**Yellow** then) **Green** hat in order to generate ideas and possible solutions. Next the discussion may move between **White** hat thinking as part of developing information and **Black** hat thinking to develop criticisms of the solution set.

Because everyone is focused on a particular approach at any one time, the group tends to be more collaborative than if one person is reacting emotionally (Red hat) while another person is trying to be objective (White hat) and still another person is being critical of the points which emerge from the discussion (Black hat).

References:
1) Edward de Bono, "Six Thinking Hats", Copyright 1985, 1999 by MICA Management Resources, Inc.
2) http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_07.htm
3) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_Bono_Hats

Festival of Thinkers

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Six Thinking Hats : Worksheet

Session Theme:_____

Thinking Hat	Questions to focus	Responses to questions on this theme
White Hat (we expect much of thinking under this hat be completed before the start of session)	What information / data we have? What is the gap in our knowledge / information? Can I fill in this knowledge gap or take this into account? What are the past trends? How can we extrapolate from this past trend to future?	
Blue Hat (for the moderator to wear through out the session) *Introduce how the discussions would be conducted and what the objectives are.*	How would I engage everyone to focus on one thinking hat at a time? How to switch to an appropriate hat when thinking along one direction (hat) runs dry in the session? How do I ensure that the intended lateral thinking by the group is not endangered by hotly contested debates and arguments against one's points?	
Red Hat • Intuition • Gut reaction • Emotion	What are the intuitive reactions to the issue? What are the emotional responses to the issue around the table? What are some ad-hoc opinions about the issue? Who would be impacted by decisions on this issue?	
Yellow Hat Optimistic thinking	What are the positive points of the proposed design for future? What are the benefits of the decision to proceed in a specific direction?	
Black Hat The pessimistic viewpoint	What are the weak points of the proposed design? Why would this solution not work?	
Green Hat Creativity • Other ways of doing things	All things considered, what are some of the creative solutions to move forward? Have we considered all possible ideas including out-of-the box, radical approaches? Are there new ways to think about this problem?	