

Six Thinking Hats

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The de Bono Hats system (also known as "Six Hats" or "Six Thinking Hats") is a thinking tool for group discussion and individual thinking. Combined with the idea of parallel thinking which is associated with it, it provides a means for groups to think together more effectively, and a means to plan thinking processes in a detailed and cohesive way. The method is attributed to Dr. Edward de Bono and is the subject of his book, Six Thinking Hats.

The paternity of this method is disputed by the School of Thinking. The method is finding some use in the UK innovation sector, is offered by some facilitation companies and has been trialled within the UK civil service.

Underlying principles

The premise of the method is that the human brain thinks in a number of distinct ways which can be identified, deliberately accessed and hence planned for use in a structured way allowing one to develop strategies for thinking about particular issues. Dr de Bono identifies six distinct states in which the brain can be "sensitised". In each of these states the brain will identify and bring into conscious thought certain aspects of issues being considered (e.g. gut instinct, pessimistic judgment, neutral facts).

A compelling example presented is sensitivity to "mismatch" stimuli. This is presented as a valuable survival instinct, because, in the natural world, the thing that is out of the ordinary may well be dangerous. This state is identified as the root of negative judgment and critical thinking.

Six distinct states are identified and assigned a color:

Information: (White) - considering purely what information is available, what are the facts?

Emotions (Red) - instinctive gut reaction or statements of emotional feeling (but not any justification)

Bad points judgment (Black) - logic applied to identifying flaws or barriers, seeking mismatch

Good points judgment (Yellow) - logic applied to identifying benefits, seeking harmony

Creativity (Green) - statements of provocation and investigation, seeing where a thought goes

Thinking (Blue) - thinking about thinking

Coloured hats are used as metaphors for each state. Switching to a state is symbolized by the act of putting on a coloured hat, either literally or metaphorically. These metaphors allow for more complete and elaborate segregation of the states than the preconceptions inherent in people's current language. All of these thinking hats help for thinking more deeply. The six thinking hats indicate problems and solutions about an idea or a product you might come up with. Furthermore, Dr de Bono asserts that these states are associated with distinct chemical states of the brain -- however, no details or evidence of this are presented.

Parallel thinking

In ordinary, unstructured thinking this process is unfocussed; the thinker leaps from critical thinking to neutrality to optimism and so on without structure or strategy. The Six Thinking Hats process attempts to introduce parallel thinking.

Many individuals are used to this and develop their own habits unconsciously. Sometimes these are effective, other times not. What is certain is that when thinking in a group these individual strategies will not tend to converge. As a result, discussion will tend not to converge. Due to the power of the ego and the identified predilection to black hat thinking in the majority of western culture, this can lead to very destructive meetings. Even with good courtesy and clear shared objectives in any collaborative thinking activity there is a natural tendency for "spaghetti thinking" where one person is thinking about the benefits while another considers the facts and so on. The hats allow this to be avoided so that everyone together considers the problems, or the benefits, or the facts, reducing distractions and supporting cross pollination of thought. This is achieved because everyone will put on one hat, e.g., the white hat, together, then they will all put on the next hat together. In this way all present think in the same way at the same time. The only exception is the facilitator, who will tend to keep the blue hat on all the time to make sure things progress effectively. The blue hat tends to be the outward-looking, leader/trail blazing hat that attracts the leaders of all groups.

Strategies and Programs

Having identified the six states that can be accessed, distinct programs can be created. These are sequences of hats which encompass and structure the thinking process toward a distinct goal. A number of these are included in the materials provided to support the franchised training of the six hats method; however it is often necessary to adapt them to suit an individual purpose. Also, programs are often "emergent", which is to say that the group might plan the first few hats then the facilitator will see what seems to be the right way to go.

Sequences always begin and end with a blue hat; the group agrees together how they will think, then they do the thinking, then they evaluate the outcomes of that thinking and what they should do next. Sequences (and indeed hats) may be used by individuals working alone or in groups.

Example programs

Initial Ideas - Blue, White, Green

Choosing between alternatives - Blue, White, Green, Yellow, Black, Red

Identifying Solutions - Blue, White, Black, Green

Quick Feedback - Blue, Black, Green, White

Strategic Planning - Blue, Yellow, Black, White

Process Improvement - Blue, White, (Other peoples views) Yellow, Black, Green, Red

Solving Problems - Blue, White, Green, Red, Yellow, Black

Performance Review - Blue, Red, White, Yellow, Black, Green

Types of hat

Included below is a brief description of each of the hats and the thinking processes that they represent. Their use is illustrated by examples from a typical commercial environment and also through the analysis of a simple classroom issue - "Students are talking while their teacher is talking".

White hat - Facts & Information

Participants make statements of fact, including identifying information that is absent and presenting the views of people who are not present in a factual manner. In many thinking sessions this occurs immediately after an initial blue hat, and is often an extended action with participants presenting details about their organization and the background to the purpose of the thinking session. The key information that represents the inputs to the session are presented and discussed. Key absences of information (i.e. information needs) can also be identified at this point.

Commercial examples are:

Total sales of this product are €x p.a.

Our sales data are two years old

Energy efficiency legislation is expected to impact our ability to run our business in the next five years

The number of elderly people in Europe is increasing

Examples in the referenced article are:

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

Students are not understanding the focused lecture due to lack of concentration

Red hat - Feelings & Emotions

Participants state their feelings, exercising their gut instincts. In many cases this is a method for harvesting ideas - it is not a question of recording statements, but rather getting everyone to identify their top two or three choices from a list of ideas or items identified under another hat. This is done to help reduce lists of many options into a few to focus on by allowing each participant to

vote for the ones they prefer. It is applied more quickly than the other hats to ensure it is a gut reaction feeling that is recorded. This method can use post-it notes to allow a quick system of voting, and creates a clear visual cue that creates rapid if incomplete agreement around an issue.

Alternatively it may be used to state ones gut reaction or feelings on an issue under discussion - this is more common when using the hats to review personal progress or deal with issues where there is high emotional content that is relevant to discussion.

Finally this hat can be used to request an aesthetic response to a particular design or object.

Commercial examples are:

I'm enthusiastic about getting involved in selling!
That role in the company doesn't appeal to me.
I'd like to do that but I feel uncertain about it.
I'm frustrated that we have let the situation get this bad!

Examples from the referenced article are:

The teacher feels offended
Students become frustrated because they can't hear directions
Those talking enjoy joking around and being heard.
It represents emotional thinking of a person.

Black hat - Being Cautious

Participants identify barriers, hazards, risks and other negative connotations. This is critical thinking, looking for problems and mismatches. This hat is usually natural for people to use, the issues with it are that people will tend to use it when it is not requested and when it is not appropriate, thus stopping the flow of others. Preventing inappropriate use of the black hat is a common obstacle and vital step to effective group thinking. Another difficulty faced is that some people will naturally start to look for the solutions to raised problems -- they start practising green on black thinking before it is requested.

Commercial examples are:

We will be facing strong competition in that market
What if we cannot get enough capital together to support the investment?
We might not be able to make it cheaply enough for our customers to buy it
There will be too much political opposition to this approach
There is a risk that new legislation will make this market unattractive

Examples from the referenced article are:

Time is wasted

Learning is compromised

Those speaking feel that black hat listeners do not respect them and do not wish to hear what they are saying

Flow of discussion is less clear

Yellow hat - Being Positive and Optimistic

Participants identify benefits associated with an idea or issue. This is the opposite of black hat thinking and looks for the reasons in favor of something. This is still a matter of judgment - it is an analytical process, not just blind optimism. One is looking to create justified statements in favor of the idea or issue. It is encapsulated by the idea of "undecided positive" (whereas the black hat would be skeptical - "undecided negative").

The outputs may be statements of the benefits that could be created with a given idea, or positive statements about the likelihood of achieving it, or identifying the key supports available that will benefit this course of action

Commercial examples are:

That would be useful in market X

That would reduce the environmental impact of our activities

This approach will make our operations more efficient

We could use our existing distribution channels for this product

Examples from the referenced article are:

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 - New Ideas

This is the hat of thinking new thoughts. It is based around the idea of provocation and thinking for the sake of identifying new possibilities. Things are said for the sake of seeing what they might mean, rather than to form a judgement. This is often carried out on black hat statements in order to identify how to get past the barriers or failings identified there (green on black thinking). Because green hat thinking covers the full spectrum of creativity, it can take many forms.

Commercial examples are:

What if we provided it for free?

Could we achieve it using technology X instead?

If we extended the course by half a day it would really help people understand

How would someone from profession X view this

Fish (green hat thinking can include random word stimulus methods)

Examples from the referenced article are:

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

Students will think of new ways to communicate rather than talking in class, for example, talk on Messenger

Students will be able to develop ideas as a result of being creative in class

Blue hat - The Big Picture

This is the hat under which all participants discuss the thinking process. The facilitator will generally wear it throughout and each member of the team will put it on from time to time to think about directing their work together. This hat should be used at the start and end of each thinking session, to set objectives, to define the route to take to get to them, to evaluate where the group has got to, and where the thinking process is going. Having a facilitator maintain this role throughout helps ensure that the group remains focused on task and improves their chances of achieving their objectives. The blue hat is also an organization of thinking. What have we done so far? What can we do next?

Commercial examples are:

We'll follow this program of thinking to start the day - does everyone agree?

OK time to move on to some yellow hat thinking

Stop there - you are getting into debate. Lets do some black hat and surface all the issues together first

I think we need to revisit our objectives, I'm not sure that they are right in light of our work so far

Examples from the referenced article are:

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

Application Method

Whilst the ideas of the hats themselves provide significant benefits, there is more to the six hats method as applied within de Bono thinking systems and as trained under his franchise. In particular the pace at which the hats are used is highly relevant.

Typically in use a project will begin with an extended white hat action, as everyone gets "on the same page" creating a shared vision of the issue being addressed. Thereafter each hat is used for a few minutes at a time only, except the red hat which is limited to a very short 30 seconds or so to ensure that it is an instinctive gut reaction, rather than a form of judgement. This pace is believed to have a positive impact on the thinking process, in accordance with Malcolm Gladwell's theories on "blink" thinking.

This ensures that groups think together in a focused manner, staying on task, it also ensures that they focus their efforts on the most important elements of any issue being discussed. However, it also has the potential to create conflict if not well facilitated, since people can feel "railroaded". To avoid this it is important to notice when there is any significant difference of opinion on the thinking process or the area in which it should focus.

Summary

Using 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).

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