

Six Thinking Hats

Introduction

This tool enables groups to look at a decision from several points of view. It was created by Edward de Bono in his book *Six Thinking Hats* and is an important and powerful technique. The tool is used to look at decisions from a number of important perspectives. This forces participants to move outside a habitual thinking style and helps achieve a more rounded view of a situation.

Many successful people think from a very rational, positive viewpoint: this is part of the reason 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; more emotional people may fail to look at decisions calmly and rationally.

If you look at a problem with the **Six Thinking Hats** technique, you will be able to solve it using all approaches. Your decisions and plans will mix ambition, skill in execution, public sensitivity, creativity and good contingency planning.²

Detailed description of the process

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 hat is a different style of thinking. These are explained below:

White hat: Objective, neutral thinking in terms of facts, numbers and information. 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 try either to fill them or take account of them. This is where you analyse past trends and try to extrapolate from historical data.

Red hat: Emotional, with judgements, suspicions and intuitions. '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: Negative, sees risks and thinks about why something will not function. 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, allowing 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: Positive, optimistic, clear, effective and constructive. The yellow thinker helps you to think positively and to put concrete suggestions on the table. 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.

² A variant of this technique is the Reframing Matrix, Tool 10 in this guide, which looks at problems from the point of view of different professionals (e.g. doctors, architects, sales directors, etc.) or different customers.

Green hat: Creative, seeks alternatives. The green hat 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. Provocation is an essential part of the green thinking. A whole range of creativity tools can help you here.

Blue hat: Thinking about thinking. The blue thinker's role is to keep an overview of what thinking is necessary to scout the subject. The blue thinker is responsible for giving summaries, surveys and conclusions. The blue thinker keeps the discipline and brings the discussions back on to the right track. 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.

Key points/practical tips

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 scepticism to be brought into what would otherwise be purely rational decisions, opening 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 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.

Example: Six hats for post-tsunami reconstruction

Under pressure from donors, media and beneficiaries, those working in housing and settlement efforts in Sri Lanka after the tsunami used the six hats approach in order to plan and implement reconstruction efforts more effectively. The German government, through its Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), is supporting key Sri Lankan governmental organizations in facilitating and implementing the housing and reconstruction process.

The Sri Lankan and German counterparts jointly conducted the planning of the entire project, including its outcomes and key activities. The joint project planning sessions commenced with the six thinking hats methodology, which was used to generate a shared sense of the key issues in the reconstruction process that needed to be further explored and practically addressed. For more, see: www.tafren.gov.lk/portal/index.jsp?sid=3&nid=14&y=2005&m=8&d=1.

Sources and further reading

- Mind Tools, see: www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_07.htm.
- De Bono, E. (1999) *Six Thinking Hats*, New York: Back Bay Books.
- Edward de Bono's webpage, see: www.edwdebono.com.