

Six Thinking Hats®

“Thinking is the ultimate human resource. Yet we can never be satisfied with our most important skill ... The main difficulty of thinking is confusion. We try to do too much at once. Emotions, information, logic, hope and creativity all crowd in on us. It’s like juggling with too many balls.” (de Bono, 2009: 2009: xi)

The big idea

Edward de Bono is credited as the inventor of the concept of lateral thinking, which is the ability to solve problems by taking indirect or creative approaches. He has produced a wide variety of publications on creative thinking and [Six Thinking Hats®](#) is one of his best-known tools.

It is a simple idea to help you take different perspectives on an issue and think about alternative ways to move forward. De Bono himself recognises that sometimes people are hesitant about using the tool because it appears too simple; we have a tendency to favour complex solutions to complex problems. It is their very simplicity that de Bono believes has contributed to the success of Six Thinking Hats; as he points out, hats and colours are much easier to remember than specialist psychological terms or jargon. Building on the symbolic meaning of ‘thinking caps’ prevalent in some cultures, de Bono introduced the metaphor of thinking hats, with each colour corresponding to a different form of thinking.

Purpose

In describing the purpose of the tool, de Bono uses the analogy of a group of people looking at a country house. One person is looking at the front of the house, one is looking at the back and two are on either side. When they come together, they each argue that theirs is the correct view of the house. Another way of looking at the house would be to walk round together and each look from the other perspective and see a different view.

This focus on parallel thinking allows everyone involved to be looking in the same direction but also provides scope for that direction to be changed. Many of us have preferred ways of thinking and may feel uncomfortable working outside this style. We may also be concerned about others seeing us as inconsistent in our thinking if we keep using a different approach.

In agreeing to use the hats, different thinking styles are both legitimised and actively encouraged. This approach can be particularly supportive of people who are less likely to put their viewpoint forward because they can try on the hats to take different views on the situation.

The tool

The tool can be used either on your own or with a group. The benefit of using it as a group is that it avoids the confrontation sometimes caused by members having to prove their view is 'right'. If you are doing it as an individual, you can work through the relevant questions one hat at a time. As a group you may assign a coloured hat to specific people and then bring the results together for a full group brainstorming. In using the hats, you are likely to work through the following steps:

1. Clarify the issue to be discussed and list the relevant questions that represent the different hats. You may also want to use physical hats or pictures of the hats
2. Walk through each question. If you are working as a part of a team, encourage participants to preface their observations with the hat they are using to think with, for example 'With my Black hat on, I'd say we could face some risks to the audience numbers by doing that ... '
3. Record the results and agree on future action



White Hat

Calls for information known or needed

Facts

Information

Data

When wearing this hat you are attempting to be neutral in your thinking.

Who, what, when, where?

What do you know about ... ?

What are the facts ... ?

What information is available?

Where can you find the information needed?



Red Hat

Feelings

Intuition

Emotions

This hat is based on your instincts, so don't think too long or too hard.

What do you feel about the issue/suggestions?

What are your gut reactions?

What does your intuition tell you?

Which way do you like the feel of?



Black Hat

Caution

Analysis

Risks

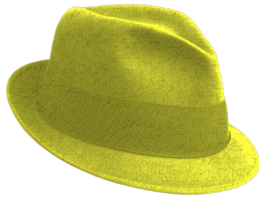
When wearing this hat you are identifying difficulties and problems.

What are the consequences of ... ?

What might be the risks?

Why won't this work?

What words of wisdom come from this?



Yellow Hat

Positives

What are the benefits?

Value

What are the advantages?

Strengths

What is the value of ... ?

When wearing this hat you are concerned with effectiveness and getting the job done.

Can this be made to work?



Green Hat

Creativity

What if?

Possibilities

What are the other ways to do this?

Alternatives

What alternatives are there?

When wearing this hat you are concerned with new concepts and new ideas.

How can this be done differently?



Blue Hat

Process

Explain

Management

Summarise

Concludes/summarises

What is the main idea?

When wearing this hat you are concerned with planning and managing the thinking process.

What is the big idea?

Action plan

How was this solution decided?

Take the next step

Think of a problem you have to solve. It can be work related or personal. Draw the six hats on a large sheet of paper and write out or draw your response next to each hat. How quickly do you get a new perspective on the problem?

Top tips

- While the hats are generally imaginary, try using actual hats to represent the different forms of thinking. Try each one on as you take a different perspective
- The hats are not descriptions of people; they describe behaviour. People may prefer one hat or another but they should not be characterised by the hat
- Keep the thinking clear and simple; it is the point of the tool. Too much complexity leads to confusion and inertia
- If it's not working, change the approach. For example, you might find that you started with the wrong hat or question. See if switching to another question or hat makes a difference

References

de Bono, E. (2009). *Six Thinking Hats* (4th ed.). London: Penguin Books Ltd.