

6 Thinking Hats

by Edward de Bono (1985)

The **Six Thinking Hats technique** (6TH) of **Edward de Bono** is a model that can be used for **exploring different perspectives towards a complex situation or challenge**. Seeing things in various ways is often a good idea in strategy formation or complex decision-making processes.

The 6TH technique is designed to help individuals deliberately adopt a variety of perspectives on a subject that may be very different from the one that they might most naturally assume. In wearing a particular thinking hat, people play roles, or "as if" themselves into a particular perspective. For instance, one could play the devil's advocate, even if only for the sake of generating discussion. The purpose of devil's advocacy is to deliberately challenge an idea: be critical, look for what is wrong with it.

Each of the Hats is named for a color that is mnemonically descriptive of the perspective one adopts when wearing the particular hat. For example the devil's advocacy is what one engages in when wearing the Black Thinking Hat.

The 6 hats and the perspectives they represent are:

- **White** (Observer) White paper; Neutral; focus on information available, objective **FACTS**, what is needed, how it can be obtained
- **Red** (Self, Other) Fire, warmth; **EMOTIONS, FEELINGS**, intuition, hunches; present views without explanation, justification
- **Black** (Self, Other) Stern judge wearing black robe; judgmental; critical; why something is wrong; **LOGICAL NEGATIVE** view.
- **Yellow** (Self, Other) Sunshine; optimism; **LOGICAL POSITIVE** view; looks for benefits, what's good.
- **Green** (Self, Other) Vegetation; **CREATIVE** thinking; possibilities and hypotheses; new ideas
- **Blue** (Observer) Sky; cool; overview; **CONTROL of PROCESS, STEPS, OTHER HATS**; chairperson, organizer; thinking about thinking

De Bono's hats are indicative of both emotional states as well as frames of mind (i.e., perspective from which an issue is viewed). He noted: "Emotions are an essential part of our thinking ability and not just something extra that mucks up our thinking" (1985, p27). One thinking style (or hat) is not inherently "better" than another. A full, balanced team recognizes the need for all hats in order for the team to consider all aspects of whatever issues they are facing.

Main benefits of the 6TH method:

- Allow to say things without risk
- Create awareness that there are multiple perspectives on the issue at hand
- Convenient mechanism for 'switching gears'
- Rules for the game of thinking
- Focus thinking
- Lead to more creative thinking
- Improve communication
- Improve decision making

Using the Six Hats

In most group contexts, individuals tend to feel constrained to consistently adopt a specific perspective (optimistic, pessimistic, objective, etc.). This limits the ways and extent to which each individual and thus the group as a whole can explore an issue. With the 6TH, one is no longer limited to a single perspective in one's thinking. The hats are categories of thinking behavior and not of people themselves. The purpose of the hats is to direct thinking, not classify either the thinking or the thinker. Indeed, by wearing a hat that is different from the one that one customarily wears, one may chance upon a variety of new ideas. Wearing a hat means deliberately adopting a perspective that is not necessarily one's own. It is important that all group members are aware of this fact. A group member must clearly identify the color of the hat he is wearing while making a statement. Wearing a clearly identified hat separates ego from performance. The Six Hat Method is useful even for individuals thinking by themselves.

Hats may be used in some structured sequence depending on the nature of the issue. Here is an **example agenda** for a typical 6 hats workshop:

Step 1: Present the facts of the case (**White Hat**)

Step 2: Generate ideas on how the case could be handled (**Green Hat**)

Step 3: Evaluate the merits of the ideas - List the benefits (**Yellow Hat**), List the drawbacks (**Black Hat**)

Step 4: Get everybody's gut feelings about the alternatives (**Red Hat**)

Step 5: Summarize and adjourn the meeting (**Blue Hat**)

Abstract written by Value Based Management.net

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