

The Six Thinking Hats

An example of a tool you can apply for group discussion and individual thinking is a process designed by Edward de Bono that uses “six thinking hats” to get a group to think, evaluate the outcomes of that thinking, and decide what they should do next.

Do not get thrown off by the "six hats" name, as that is simply a mental hook. When we think and process information, especially in open forums, it is a mix of emotion, logic, creativity, optimism, and caution. That gets real hard, real fast. Complicating matters is the long-standing belief in many circles that getting one's point across is to be viewed as a victory. Dialogues become debates. Conversations become arguments. All these dynamics can produce inefficiency and stalemates, confusion and frustration.

Six Hats thinking merely offers an alternative way to look at things.

The premise is the human brain thinks in a number of distinct ways that can be deliberately challenged, and hence planned for use in a structured way, allowing one to develop tactics for thinking about particular issues.



Blue Hat

It manages the thinking. It is the “control” hat. Blue hat organizes the thinking, sets the focus and agenda, summarizes and concludes, and ensures the rules are observed. Sequences always begin and end with a blue hat. The person with the blue hat orchestrates the process, keeps everyone wearing the proper hat at a given time to maintain parallel thinking.



White Hat

It is the information hat. Identifies information we have, need, and lack. Wonders what questions need asking to get the right information and how we are going to get that information. Emphasizes that facts and figures cannot be treated objectively when put forward as part of an argument. Reminds us of the difference between a checked fact and an unchecked fact (belief). Asks us to take the mindset of a computer. This is also called a “neutral” hat because it deals in facts, data, and the like. A picture emerges from white hat thinking.



Red Hat

It deals with emotion and intuition which are key ingredients in decision-making. The Red hat gives permission to express feelings with no need to justify them. It represents feelings right now and helps give insight as to “where people are coming from” in a non-punitive way. It opens the door for one to pull on tacit knowledge – views stemming from life experience to include bias, heuristics, and pattern recognition. The red hat is recommended to be used for a very short period to get a visceral gut reaction - about 30 seconds, and is a great way to start the process, “lay it out on the table.”



Black Hat

This is the hat of caution and survival. It helps identify risks, difficulties, and problems. Black hat is the skeptical view. Points out potential problems and thinking that does not fit the facts, experience, regulations, strategy, or values. Why will something not work? Why might it not be the right thing to do? It is the one hat that allows us to deconstruct the thinking process of the topic at hand. It can counter Yellow hat optimism and can deconstruct yellow hat arguments. In all instances, however, reasons must be given. Logic must dominate the black hat responses; if based on emotion then it is a red hat thought. As a general rule, we are all “natural” black hats. People who over-use the black hat tend to spend a lot of their energy finding fault in things.



Yellow Hat

It deals with benefits and feasibility, not fantasy. It is the optimistic view. In fact, optimism is a requirement to use this hat. It helps find the benefits and values and considers both short- and long-term perspectives. Reasons must be given. However, if all one has is speculation, then go forward with it under this hat. Use the yellow hat to deconstruct and counter the black hat. Yellow hat takes more effort than the black hat, because it forces optimism, and is usually the easiest role for the project advocates to take. Where the Black hat is about risk, the yellow hat is about opportunity. In fact, any opportunity the yellow hat identified can be given to the green hat to see how that opportunity can be exploited.



Green Hat

It deals with new ideas and possibilities. It is the creative thinking hat, all about energy. The yellow hat identifies the opportunity but has no responsibility to explain how it can come about: the Green hat takes on that responsibility. Green seeks alternatives and possibilities, removes faults, and generates new concepts. It does not have to be logical. It provokes risk-taking. It demands new approaches and replaces judgment with movement. Of all hats, our experience shows this is at once very difficult to role-play but also one of the most insightful.

Blue Hat Sample Questions

- What is the problem?
- What is the decision we are after?
- What sequence of thinking hats ought we use?
- What process will we use to work each hat?
- How will we move on to the next hat?
- How do we get each hat to play off the other?

White Hat Sample Questions

- What is the objective?
- What is the framing assumption?
(e.g. the supposition that is central to achieving the objective)
- What is the context (who, what, when, where, why, how, how much)?
- What are the beliefs and opinions in play?
- What are the facts we know vice interpretations we have?
- What information do we require?
- What questions need asking?
- What information is missing?
- Where can we find this information?

Red Hat Sample Questions

- What do you think about this?
- What is your initial reaction?
- What kind of emotions does this bring out?
- What is your gut feeling?
- How might your feelings change over time?

Yellow Hat Sample Questions

- What makes this so successful?
- What are the benefits?
- How does this make things better?
- What other benefits are there not presented?
- How do you know this will be so beneficial?
- Why do you think this will be successful?
- What black hat concerns can we deconstruct and show to be flawed?
- What should the green hat expand upon to show how we can get there?
- What does success look like?

Black Hat Sample Questions

- What are the risks?
- What are the failure scenarios?
- What are the potential unintended consequences?
- Why won't this work?
- What are the weaknesses?
- What are we forgetting that will bite us?
- How do we know this will not work?
- What makes this more difficult than we might be assuming?
- What yellow hat opportunities can we deconstruct and show to be flawed?
- Where are there real dangers?
- Why should we not proceed?

Green Hat Sample Questions

- Can we do this another way?
- What new ideas does this generate?
- What opportunity does this offer?
- What are the immediate steps after success?
- What yellow hat opportunities should we expand upon?
- What thought experiment could we do here?
- What risks ought we accept?
- What odd – even implausible - scenario could we come up with based on this idea just to generate more insights?
- What original white hat assumptions might we totally reverse just to see where it leads?

Example approaches are discussed below. Each hat is typically used for approximately two minutes at a time.

- **Initial ideas, brainstorming** - Blue, White, Green, Blue
- **Choosing between alternatives** - Blue, White,(Green), Yellow, Black, Red, Blue
- **Identifying solutions** - Blue, White, Black, Green, Blue
- **Quick feedback** - Blue, Black, Green, Blue
- **Strategic planning** - Blue, Yellow, Black, White, Blue, Green, Blue
- **Process improvement** - Blue, White, White (other people's views), Yellow, Black, Green, Red, Blue
- **Problem-solving** - Blue, White, Green, Red, Yellow, Black, Green, Blue
- **Performance review** - Blue, Red, White, Yellow, Black, Green Red, Blue.