



articles

This article introduces the Six Thinking Hats framework, designed to help teams reach conclusions acceptable to all, or open up new ways of thinking about a challenge.

Six Thinking Hats: how to work out what's a good idea

Summary

Six Thinking Hats (**6TH**) was developed by internationally respected consultant Edward de Bono. His work is now widely used in education and business.

It's a useful technique for helping groups:

- engage in developing and sharing ideas
- make better decisions about which ideas to progress
- align their thinking – so using parallel thinking rather than confused or conflicted

The technique is based on the idea that there are six imaginary hats. Each hat is a different colour, and represents a different type of thinking. When you 'put on' a hat, you operate *exclusively* in that mode of thinking. When you change from one hat to another, you change thinking modes. And importantly everyone thinks the same way at the same time – so avoiding futile positive versus negative conflict.

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De Bono uses a hats metaphor because:

- there's a link between 'thinking' and 'hats' — for example, people say 'put on your thinking cap.' So the idea makes sense to people when you explain it to them
- hats can be put on or taken off very easily. This encourages people to switch and think in different ways rather than to stay stuck in one mode.

What's the problem?

DeBono developed the technique having noticed that when critical or contentious decisions need to be made, teams can find themselves in deadlock, unable to make a decision and move forward. And there are times when teams get stuck in a rut, simply recycling the same ideas or variations on the same theme. This latter is especially challenging when what's actually needed is some focused creative thinking to drive meaningful and innovative changes to what the team does or how they do it.

So how do we bring fractious discussions to a conclusion acceptable to all, or open up new ways of thinking? De Bono's answer was to devise a framework for focused, *systematic* thinking — the Six Thinking Hats.

What are the principles?

De Bono chose six hats to cover the different approaches to thinking he'd identified, and he gave them different colour to allow easy association and visualisation. Each coloured hat represents a particular type of thinking, each with its own 'rules' about that type of thinking.

6TH requires everyone taking part in a discussion or in the decision-making to 'put on' the same hat at the same time and *only use that hat at that time*. By moving through the different ways of thinking *collectively* a more rounded approach is taken to appraising an idea, and new avenues of discussion are often uncovered.

Importantly De Bono emphasised that 6TH was about modes of behaviour and not individual personalities. Of course, many people have a *preference* for certain types of thinking. (And in the world of business 'critical' thinking is highly regarded, whereas in the arts 'creative' thinking is more often praised.) So when there are two or more people with different preferences involved in a discussion it can, not surprisingly, be very hard to get consensus as each person is convinced theirs is the most accurate point of view.

By requiring everyone to use the *same hat* – way of thinking – at the *same time*, 6TH both ensures everyone has the opportunity to air their views *and* that every angle of the issue is properly explored. And you get a full and open discussion with everyone working together.



The Six Hats explained

The White Hat – facts & information

This hat is all about factual, observable data. It looks at what is known and what information could be missing. The association is with paper, on which ‘facts’ are recorded.



The Red Hat – feelings & intuition

This hat about feelings, insights and intuition. It focuses on what people feel about the issue under discussion. Importantly, there’s no need to rationalise or explain.



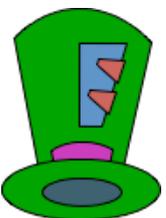
The Yellow Hat – benefits & advantages

Sunshine and optimism is represented here. The team all think about the possible advantages, benefits or opportunities an idea can present.



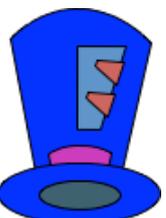
The Black Hat – caution & problems

Black like lawyers’ robes, this hat is the opposite of the yellow hat. The focus here is on problems, risks and challenges that this idea might pose.



The Green Hat – creativity & solutions

Representing new growth, this hat asks the team to consider new approaches or to build on and improve an existing approach. This hat is often used in a brainstorm to generate ideas.



The Blue Hat – managing thinking

For blue-skies and oversight. Unlike all the other hats, the Blue Hat is only worn by one person, who chairs the discussion. The Blue Hat wearer, with agreement, defines the process – what de Bono calls the **pre-set sequence** (see below) – and ensures everyone wears the right hat at the right time. This hat also summarises discussions and pulls out the conclusions/next steps.

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De Bono encouraged different sequences of hats, called a pre-set sequence, to enable different types of discussions: so one set for innovation, one set for risk analysis, one set to promote discussion.

How can I use this tool?

6TH can be used to help progress discussions, achieve consensus and drive innovation. Here are some examples of how we've used it with our clients.

1. Facilitation

6TH is very useful as a facilitation tool, setting a structure for the discussion. A pre-set sequence for the hats can be agreed at the start, depending on the type of discussion. Taking on the Blue Hat, the facilitator can then oversee the process, and keep the discussion moving through the hat sequence at the agreed intervals.

6TH is a great tool for recognising when a group of people have fallen into 1-hat thinking and the discussion is going nowhere. The facilitator then needs to move the group on to a different hat to open up the discussion. For example, we've found when facilitating teams who are looking for new ideas for projects, or wanting to make changes to internal processes, such as reducing the amount of internal bureaucracy, that there can be a tendency towards Black Hat thinking. People concentrate on the problems or obstacles to doing something new or different. "That will never work," "Our processes don't allow that to happen." They then get stuck in a rut, always concentrating on the 'why we shouldn't' and as a result nothing changes and no new ideas are taken forward.

To break this way of thinking we ask key questions to shift the group into Yellow Hat thinking, giving them the space and time to explore the advantages and solutions to different processes or ideas. "What opportunities could this present?" "What are the advantages of working in this way instead?" "Are there any benefits?"

In other instances when we find a group talking in circles around an issue with lots of assumptions flying around, introducing some White Hat thinking – "What are the facts in this case?" – can help to clarify the situation, as will "Let's remind ourselves of what we definitely know..."

2. Reaching Consensus

Reaching consensus in group decision-making is probably what 6TH is best known for. Depending on the group, it can feel like an impossible ask at times, but is the outcome most desired. Using 6TH ensures the group views the problem from all angles and helps to get individuals out of particular mind-sets. Everyone has the opportunity to really get their view across *and work collectively* towards an outcome that is not driven by individual preferences, which can create conflict, but by the desire to get the best possible result through consensus.

For example, a recent client was getting frustrated at the lack of buy-in from his senior management team to increase their investment in supporting volunteers. With a bit of coaching, he applied 6TH to the discussion and he discovered that they had been spending a lot of time on White Hat thinking, focusing largely on the facts and figures around new staff and costs. What he and the senior management team hadn't done was take into account how people felt about what the investment could mean for the organisation and its volunteers. Our client went back and balanced the White Hat thinking with some Red Hat "How do we feel about our volunteers?" "What's your gut reaction to this idea?" By finally recognising how people were feeling about what volunteers bring to the organisation above and beyond the financial considerations, the SMT was able to reach a consensus and our client to get his increased investment.

3. Creativity and Innovation

At =mc we use 6TH to decide which of the ideas generated in a creativity brainstorm should be moved on to innovation. We examine each creative idea, and use the hats to properly explore its viability and potential implementation.

We also use this approach to encourage groups to get away from business as usual, to bring a new dimension into the discussion. The hats encourages people to embrace a different line of thinking in a structured environment. Early Green Hat is key in these discussions. It focuses on creativity, opening up the space for new ideas. It's important at this point that you don't allow any Black Hat thinking in to kill ideas. Green Hat thinking allows discussion of a new project idea that appears to be outside the scope of the work the organisation or team is known for. The output is often a brainstormed list. If you have 20 ideas you probably need to cut them down. Red Hat allows you to select maybe five that people 'feel' have some traction. Then Yellow Hat followed by Black Hat applied to each idea works out the advantages and disadvantages. Finally a repeat of Red Hat helps choose the 'winning' idea.

Wider success stories

There are some well-known examples in the private sector where 6TH has been used successfully, including Motorola, IBM and Boeing. They have reported significant outcomes such as cutting meeting times by half and successfully brainstorming new products. Perhaps less laudably, researchers for the new Speedo swimsuit used 6TH¹ to circumvent new rules set by Olympic officials. They started with Green Hat to generate new ideas, then moved on to the Black and Yellow Hats to weigh up the feasibility of those ideas.

In the non-profit sector, ODI reports that the German and Sri Lankan governments used 6TH to collaborate on post-tsunami reconstruction. At the beginning of meetings they used the method “to generate a shared sense of the key issues in the reconstruction process that needed to be further explored and practically addressed.”²

Hospitals have found 6TH invaluable in the rehabilitation of children with post-operative problems. In one case doctors replaced hats with balloons, as a tool to open up the conversation between children, their families and the medical staff in charge of their care. And finally schools are now teaching and using de Bono’s tool to introduce students to different ways of thinking and to facilitate discussions on contentious issues in the classroom.

What next?

If you’ve found this article helpful and you would like more information, please call **+44 (0)20 7978 1516** and speak to one of our [learning and development consultants](#).

Or, if Six Thinking Hats sounds exactly what your organisation needs, talk to us about our in-house training programmes on [Facilitation skills](#) or [Creativity and Innovation](#).

¹ [Article: How Speedo created the new swimsuit \(using 6TH\)](#)

² [ODI article: Collaboration Mechanisms: Six Thinking Hats](#)