

# Six Thinking Hats: Synopsis and Overview

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overview prepared by M. Baljko, 30 Sept 2021

The material for this synopsis and overview is: De Bono, Edward. *Six Thinking Hats*. 2017. Penguin edition (revised and updated edition from 1985 edition)

There are 6 extensive quotes, which are being provided here under Fair Dealing.

## About the Author

- Edward de Bono invented the concept of lateral thinking, a leading authority in the field of creative thinking and the direct teaching of thinking as a skill.
- the concept of lateral thinking has become very entrenched in our everyday language

## Introduction

- A basic idea from de Bono is that "Western thinking" has certain characteristics: it is based on dialectic and argument, with more emphasis on critique and less emphasis on constructive outcome
- e.g., Socrates, wanting to clarify the correct use of concepts like justice and love, focused on usage; Plato focusing on the 'ultimate' truth hidden below appearance; Aristotle systematized inclusion/exclusion logic.
- As a result, "Western thinking" became concerned with 'what is', which is determined by analysis, judgement and argument, identifying 'boxes', definitions, categories or principles and deploying them in our thinking
- "A thinking system based on argument is excellent just as the front left wheel of a car is excellent. There is nothing wrong with it at all. But it is not sufficient."
- "Instead of judging our way forward, we need to design our way forward. We need to be thinking about 'what can be', not just about 'what is'."
- The Six Hats method (parallel thinking) is all about providing a simple model of constructive thinking. "The biggest enemy of thinking is complexity, for that leads to confusion. When thinking is clear and simple, it becomes more enjoyable and more effective."
- Parallel thinking means that, at any moment, everyone is looking in the same direction, just like 4 people all looking at the same house, but each from a different side of the house

(front, back, left side, right side). If each person eventually looks at all sides of the building, the subject is explored fully. All views, no matter how contradictory, get put down in parallel. "If, later on, it is essential to choose between the different positions, then an attempt to choose is made at that point. If a choice cannot be made, then the design has to cover both possibilities."

- Parallel thinking is different from argumentation (which can be characterized by adversarial, confrontational thinking in which each party takes opposing views). Each tries to prove the other party wrong.
- **Hats are directions:** "The essence of parallel thinking is that at any moment everyone is looking in the same direction – but the direction can be changed. An explorer might be asked to look north or to look east. Those are standard direction labels. So we need some direction labels for thinking. What are the different directions in which thinkers can be invited to look?"
- **Hats are used as symbols to request a particular type of thinking.**

## Using the Hats

- The hats are typically used one after the other, in a certain sequence.
  - Any hat can be used as often as you like.
  - There is no need to use every hat.
  - The sequence may be made up of two, three, four or more hats.
- The hats may be used by an individual thinking on their own or in a group. In groups, people still can and should do their own individual thinking and should be contributing equitably (which a facilitator can support).
- Any sequence of hats that makes sense is allowed, there is no one right sequence to follow. Experience will help you to get used to setting up sequences and using them. "Some sequences are appropriate for exploration, some for problem solving, for dispute settlement, for decision making, and so forth."
- A blue hat should always be used both at the beginning and at the end of the session – like two bookends.
- There are two broad types of sequence: evolving and pre-set.
  - **pre-set sequence:** the sequence is laid out in advance of the beginning of the activity, under an initial blue hat. The sequence then followed (with minor variations permitted)
  - **evolving sequence:** a first hat is chosen (by an individual or a facilitator, in a group setting). When that hat is completed, the next hat is chosen, and so on. Recommended for those with experience (so as to avoid lack of clarity about what the hats are and what should come next; to avoid the factor of the sequence being manipulating so as

to achieve certain outcomes)

- It is very important that members of the group remain disciplined and stay with the hat that is indicated at that moment. Cannot say "I want to put on my hat here."
- It is important to set out a time duration for each hat, it is much better to set a short time and to extend it rather than set a long time and have people sitting around wondering what to say. In a live group setting, could start with 1 minute per person, and extend as needed.

## Benefits of Six Hat Thinking and Methods

- Helps groups and individuals to both explore and design. Certain hats – the red, yellow and black – are used for assessment, not just information.
- In some situations, it may not be possible to make a decision. In this case, the final blue hat should lay out why it is not possible (e.g., lack of information, different values that cannot be reconciled).
- A final blue hat (in one activity) can define a new thinking focus, which then can then become the task of a new thinking session.
- There are two main purposes to the Six Thinking Hats concept.
  - to simplify thinking by allowing a thinker to deal with one thing at a time.
    - Instead of having to take care of emotions, logic, information, hope and creativity all at the same time, the thinker is able to deal with them separately. Instead of using logic to support a half-disguised emotion, the thinker can bring the emotion to the surface with the red thinking hat without any need to justify it. The black thinking hat can then deal with the logic aspect.
  - to signal switches in thinking and to request certain types of thinking; it provides an idiom that is definite and can be used when talking to others (e.g., by turning it into role-playing or even a game)
    - If a person at a meeting has been persistently negative, that person can be asked to take off the black thinking hat. This signals to the person that he or she is being persistently negative. The person may also be asked to put on the yellow thinking hat. That is a direct request to be positive.

## The Blue Hat

Think of the blue sky above. Think of 'overview'. The blue hat is for thinking about thinking.

The blue hat is like the conductor of the orchestra. The conductor gets the best out of the orchestra by seeing that what should be done is done at the right time. The blue hat is like the ringmaster of a circus. The blue hat is for the management of thinking. The blue hat is for the organization of thinking. The blue hat is for process control.

Using the blue hat at the beginning of a thinking session defines the situation. The blue hat may seek alternative definitions of a problem. The blue hat lays out the purpose of the thinking. The blue hat lays out what is to be achieved.

It is under the initial blue hat that the agenda or sequence of use of the other hats is laid out. The blue hat may also specify other thinking processes – even if the hats are not to be used. The blue hat sets the thinking 'strategy'. During the session the blue hat keeps the discipline and ensures that people keep to the relevant hat. The blue hat also announces a change of hats.

Typically the blue hat is worn by the facilitator, chairperson or leader of the session. This is a permanent role. In addition, during a specific blue hat session, anyone can make procedural suggestions.

At the end of a session the blue hat asks for the outcome. This may be in the form of a summary, a conclusion, a decision, a solution and so on. The blue hat may even acknowledge that little progress has been made. Under the final blue hat the next steps can be laid out. These might be action steps, or further thinking on some points.

## The White Hat

Think of paper. Think of a computer printout. The white hat is about information. When the white hat is in use, everyone focuses directly and exclusively on information.

What information do we have?

What information do we need?

What information is missing?

What questions do we need to ask?

How are we going to get the information we need?

The information can range from hard facts and figures that can be checked to soft information like opinions and feelings. If you express your own feeling, that is red hat, but if you report on someone else expressing a feeling, that is white hat.

When two offered pieces of information disagree, there is no argument on that point. Both pieces of information are put down in parallel. Only if it becomes essential to choose between them will the choice be made.

The white hat is usually used towards the beginning of a thinking session as a background for the thinking that is going to take place. The white hat also can be used towards the end of the session as a sort of assessment: Do our proposals fit in with the existing information?

The white hat is neutral. The white hat reports on the world. The white hat is not for generating ideas though it is permissible to report on ideas that are in use or have been suggested.

A very important part of the white hat is to define the information that is missing and needed. The white hat defines the questions that should be asked. The white hat lays out the means (such as surveys and questionnaires) for obtaining the needed information.

White hat energy is directed at seeking out and laying out information.

## The Green Hat

The green hat is the energy hat. Think of vegetation. Think of growth. Think of new leaves and branches. The green hat is the creative hat.

Under the green hat we put forward new ideas. Under the green hat we lay out options and alternatives. These include both the obvious alternatives and fresh ones. Under the green hat we seek to modify and improve suggested ideas.

The value of the green hat is that a specific time is set out for everyone to make a creative effort. Creativity is no longer just the business of the 'idea person' while everyone else sits around waiting to pounce on an idea. When the green hat is in use everyone is expected to make a creative effort – or else keep quiet. People do not like keeping quiet, so they make a creative effort.

The deliberate allocation of time to creative effort is very important. It acknowledges that creativity is a key ingredient in thinking.

The 'expectation' aspect is also very important. People are very good at doing what is expected of them. People are very good at playing the 'game' that they perceive to be in progress. The result is that people who have never thought of themselves as creative start making a creative effort. Their confidence increases and soon they are as creative as anyone else.

Under the green hat you are permitted to put forward 'possibilities'. Possibilities play a much bigger role in thinking than most people believe. Without possibilities you cannot make progress. Two thousand years ago, Chinese technology was way ahead of Western technology. Then progress seemed to come to an end. The explanation often given is that the Chinese did not develop the hypothesis. Without this key piece of mental software it was impossible to make progress.

Those who believe that progress arises from the analysis of information and steps of logical deduction are totally wrong. Without the framework of possibilities we cannot even see the information in new ways.

It is under the green hat that suggested courses of action are put forward: 'We could do this, or this, or this.' The green hat is also used to overcome some of the difficulties put forward under the black hat. The green hat may suggest modifications to an idea to avoid the difficulties. The green hat may suggest the need for an additional idea.

The green hat includes both 'the top of the head' creativity and 'deliberate' creativity.

If the green hat has produced lots of ideas and possibilities, there may not be enough time at that session to consider them all. The red hat may then be used to pick out those ideas that seem to fit a particular frame. For instance, the frame might be 'low-cost ideas' or 'ideas that are easy to test'. The other ideas might be dealt with later. In this way the energy of the green hat may still be used in a practical way.

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## The Red Hat

Think of fire. Think of warmth. Think of feelings. Using the red hat gives you an opportunity to express feelings, emotions and intuition without any need to explain or to justify them.

In a normal business discussion you are not supposed to allow your emotions to enter in. They enter in anyway – you merely disguise them as logic. The red hat provides a unique and special opportunity for feelings, emotions and intuition to be put forward as such.

Intuition may be based on a lot of experience.

... I feel this is the right person for the job.

... I feel this is a risky venture.

... My intuition tells me that this explanation is too complex.

Those feelings are useful. However, intuition is not necessarily always right. Even the great Einstein's intuition was wrong when he dismissed Heisenberg's uncertainty principle.

Under the red hat a range of feelings can be expressed: enthusiastic, 'love it', 'like it', neutral, uncertain, doubtful, mixed, unhappy, 'don't like it', and so on. The expression of feeling may vary from culture to culture. In Japan, feelings are expressed in a very low-key way: 'I must think about it.' In the United States, more robust feelings are expressed: 'That is a lousy idea.'

There is no need to explain or justify the feelings. Indeed, that should never be permitted by the chairperson. If people think that they have to validate their feelings, they will put forward only feelings that can be validated. So no explanation should be allowed. In every case, just express the feelings as they exist – at that moment. It may be that in twenty minutes' time the feelings will have changed. Sometimes it is useful to have a red hat towards the beginning of the meeting to assess feelings, and then another red hat towards the end to see if the feelings have changed.

The red hat is always applied to a specific idea or situation. The thinker is not permitted to change the idea.

If the request is 'Give me your red hat on contributions that are compulsory', then the thinker would not be permitted to say: 'I would like the idea if the contributions were voluntary.'

It must be made very clear what the red hat is being applied to. Otherwise there is confusion. If necessary, the chairperson can put forward different versions (modifications) of an idea and get a red hat on each version.

The red hat can also cover 'intellectual feelings', which are perfectly valid:

... I feel that the idea has potential.

... That idea is very interesting.

... The idea is very unusual.

The red hat is always done on an individual basis. Every individual present at the meeting is asked in turn for his or her red hat feeling on the issue under discussion.

Individuals should not be allowed to say 'pass' when they are asked for their red hat feelings. They can use terms like neutral, undecided, confused, doubtful or mixed.

If feelings are defined as mixed, then the facilitator may ask what goes into the mix.

The purpose of the red hat is to express feelings as they exist – not to force a judgement.

# The Black Hat

The black hat is the most used of all the hats. The black hat is perhaps the most important hat. The black hat is the hat of caution. The black hat is for being careful. The black hat stops us doing things that are illegal, dangerous, unprofitable, polluting, and so on.

The black hat is the hat of survival. An animal has to learn which berries are poisonous and to read the danger signs of a predator. In order to survive we need to be cautious. We need to know what to avoid. We need to identify what is not going to work. That is how we survive. One silly mistake and we could be wiped out no matter how creative we might be.

The black hat is the basis of Western civilization because the black hat is the basis of critical thinking. The basis of traditional argument has been to point out how something is contradictory or inconsistent. The black hat points out how something does not fit our resources, our policy, our strategy, our ethics, our values, and so forth.

The black hat is based on a natural mechanism in the mind. That is the 'mismatch' mechanism. The brain forms patterns of expectation: this is what the world is like. If we come across something that does not match these existing patterns, then we feel very uncomfortable. This natural mechanism ensures that we do not make mistakes.

Food is excellent. Food is essential for life. But too much food might make you overweight and might cause health problems. That is not the fault of the food but the fault of overeating.

In the same way, there are people who overuse the black hat and who spend all their time trying to find fault. The fault is not in the black hat but in the abuse, overuse or misuse of the black hat.

One of the great values of the Six Hats method is that there is an allotted time in which everyone is invited to be as cautious, as careful and as critical as possible. But outside this allotted time it is not permitted to be critical at every possible point.

Experience has shown that people who are habitually cautious and have built their reputations on being critical actually welcome the Six Hats method. The black hat allows them to use their critical abilities to the fullest. When there is a switch to another hat, then that thinker is given permission to move away from being cautious. In many cases cautious thinkers have surprised themselves by being very creative under the green hat.



## The Yellow Hat

Think of sunshine. Think of optimism. Under the yellow hat a thinker deliberately sets out to find whatever benefit there may be in a suggestion. Under the yellow hat the thinker tries to see how it may be possible to put the idea into practice.

The yellow hat is a harder hat to wear than the black hat. There is a natural mechanism in the brain that helps us to avoid dangers. There is no such natural mechanism for the yellow hat. For this reason most people are much better at using the black hat than the yellow hat.

We need to develop 'value sensitivity'. That means being as sensitive to value as we already are sensitive to danger. That is a habit that has to be developed. I have sat in on many creative meetings where excellent ideas have been generated. Unfortunately, the people present do not see the value in their own ideas. It is a waste of time setting out to be creative if you are not going to recognize a good idea. That is why the development of value sensitivity is so very important.

The yellow hat has a high value because it forces people to spend time seeking out value. Sometimes there are big surprises under the yellow hat. Something that did not seem very interesting suddenly has a high value. Even the most unattractive ideas can be found to have some value, if we look hard enough.

The yellow hat should be logically based. There should be some reason given for the value put forward. The yellow hat is a judgement hat and is not based on fantasy. What are the values? For whom? Under what circumstance? How are the values delivered? What other values are there?