

Six Thinking Hats®

Looking at a Decision in Different Ways

What's your instinctive approach to decision making? If you're naturally optimistic, then chances are you don't always consider the potential downsides to a decision. Similarly, if you're very cautious, you might not focus on opportunities that could open up.

Whatever your gut tells you, the best decisions usually come after you've explored several ways of viewing a problem.

However, it's easy to feel confused if you try to consider multiple angles at once. And things can get even more complicated – even combative – if your whole team weighs in with different points of view.

"Six Thinking Hats" is a way of investigating an issue from a variety of perspectives, but in a clear, conflict-free way. It can be used by individuals or groups to move outside habitual ways of thinking, try out different approaches, and then think constructively about how to move forward.

In this article, we'll explain the principles behind the Six Thinking Hats technique and examine how it could improve decision making for you and your team.

Who Invented "Six Thinking Hats"?

The Six Thinking Hats approach was created by [Edward de Bono](#), a Maltese physician, psychologist and philosopher. He used it in his work advising government agencies, but he also wanted it to be a

practical tool for everyday problem solving. It first appeared in his 1985 book of the same name, which has since been revised several times. [1]

De Bono – who [died in 2021](#) – was also the inventor of "lateral thinking," a method of solving problems indirectly, often in creative and surprising ways. Similarly, Six Thinking Hats is a way to understand and explore different types of thinking.

Six Thinking Hats for Decision Making

The Six Thinking Hats technique gets you to look at a problem in six different ways. It takes you and your team beyond any instinctive positions, so that you explore a range of perspectives. That way, you can carefully consider each one, without having to argue your case or make snap decisions about what's "right" or "wrong."

By the time you've tried out all six hats, you should have a rich collection of insights that will help you to decide your next steps.

Here's what each of the Six Thinking Hats represents:

Blue Hat: "the Conductor's Hat"

When you or your team are in blue hat mode, you focus on controlling your thinking and managing the decision-making process. You have an agenda, ask for summaries, and reach conclusions.

Green Hat: "the Creative Hat"

The green hat represents creative thinking. When you're "wearing" this hat, you explore a range of ideas and possible ways forward.

Red Hat: "the Hat for the Heart"

This hat represents feelings and instincts. When you're engaged in this type of thinking, you can express your feelings without having to justify them logically.

Yellow Hat: "the Optimist's Hat"

With yellow hat thinking, you look at issues in the most positive light possible. You accentuate the benefits and the added value that could come from your ideas.

Black Hat: "the Judge's Hat"

This hat is about being cautious and assessing risks. You employ critical judgment and explain exactly why you have concerns.

Tip:

The black hat is one of the most powerful hats, but it's often overused. Make sure that you and your team can justify any critical or cautionary comments, so that this mode of thinking doesn't dominate your decision making.

White Hat: "the Factual Hat"

The white hat represents information gathering. Think about the knowledge and insights that you've collected already – but also the information you're missing, and where you can go to get it.

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Note:

Some colors have cultural implications, so you may have to pick new colors for one or more of your hats. In China, for example, a green hat can mean an unfaithful spouse. And you might decide to change the black hat to grey, so as not to associate black with faultfinding.

It's fine to use any colors that are appropriate for you and your team – just as long as all six are different, and you stick with the same colors each time you use this technique.

Tip:

There are several other decision-making techniques that explore problems from different angles.

[The Reframing Matrix](#) encourages you to try out a range of perspectives when you're designing a product or service. What are the key considerations from a marketing perspective, say, or from the point of view of your manufacturing team?

[Constructive Controversy](#) involves pitting different approaches against each other. This means that it's more combative than Six Thinking Hats. But it can also generate energy, help people to reconsider their positions, and result in well-tested decisions.

And [Empathy Mapping](#) is a useful tool when you want to understand the perspectives of key stakeholders, in order to incorporate them in your plans.

The Benefits of Six Thinking Hats

As well as improving the quality of your decisions, the Six Thinking Hats technique has some other benefits to offer:

More organized thinking. You can be confident that you've considered every angle, and it helps you to weigh up the information you obtain efficiently and accurately.

Improved creativity. It gets you to step away from your default positions and approaches. And comparing or combining different perspectives can sometimes spark [novel thoughts](#).

Better thinking skills. It's a great way to strengthen important skills such as [curiosity](#) and critical thinking.

Stronger interpersonal skills. It encourages you to practice [listening](#), [questioning and answering](#). So it can also make you more persuasive, better at spotting when others need support, and more confident to resolve conflicts when they arise.

Greater inclusivity in teams. It requires people to set aside any preconceptions and to focus on seeing things from the same perspective for a while. Debate still happens, but it's based on shared understanding – which can help everyone to feel included.

Note:

It's important to remember that some members of your team might find some types of thinking challenging – possibly due to [neurodivergence](#) – and need reassurance or support. However, they may also excel while wearing particular hats! So use this technique as a chance to play to everyone's strengths.

Key Points

De Bono's Six Thinking Hats is a powerful technique for looking at decision making from different perspectives.

It involves six distinct types of thinking, which you can do on your own or with your team. Each thinking style is represented by a different hat:

Blue Hat: organization and planning

Green Hat: creative thinking

Red Hat: feelings and instincts

Yellow Hat: benefits and values

Black Hat: risk assessment

White Hat: information gathering

By "wearing" each of the Six Thinking Hats in turn, you can gain a rich understanding of the issues you face – and the best ways forward. You also encourage everyone to be fully involved in the decision-making process.