Learning to Think with More than One Hat

Let’s think about thinking

It sounds silly but I am serious when I say I want you to think about thinking. Let’s start this way. What words, mental pictures or ideas come to mind when you hear the words thinking or problem solving?

The Greek “Gang of Three”

Whether you realize it or not, our concepts and approaches concerning thinking and problem solving have been largely shaped by what Dr. Edward de Bono calls the “Greek gang of three.” We know them better as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Let’s briefly note the influence of each:

Socrates:

Plato:

Aristotle:
By way of illustration

Imagine that you are in meeting room. You and nine others have been summoned as a part of an executive team. The team leader begins by describing a problem. She makes it clear that this problem is a top priority and that a fix must be identified and implemented as soon as possible. Glancing quickly at each member, she says, “OK, what are we going to do? I need your best thoughts on a solution to this problem?

Admittedly, you do not know all the details but you probably have been in enough meetings where the participants were challenged to think and problem solve. Based on your experience, what would you predict that the rest of this meeting might look or sound like? How would you characterize some of the discussion that would likely transpire in the meeting? What kind of behaviors might we expect to observe?

A different approach to thinking

Dr. Edward de Bono is often regarded as the world’s leading authority on the teaching of thinking as a skill. He is a Rhodes Scholar and holds degrees in medicine and psychology. It was early in 80’s that de Bono developed a framework for changing the way people think about problems. His model has been referred to as “parallel thinking.” It focuses on tapping into the unique brain power of every group member and encouraging them to think in a tandem or parallel fashion.

Unfortunately, many of us are still stuck in thinking like the “Greek gang of three” taught. Dr. de Bono argues that we need a new model for thinking and contends that parallel thinking is the right vehicle for this. This older model worked well in stable world but de Bono asserts that our modern, changing world requires a new approach to thinking—one that is about “what can be” not just “what is.”

Parallel thinking is about learning to change our way of thinking to move beyond the limitations of analysis, judgment and argument.
Another way of thinking about parallel thinking

In his book, Six Thinking Hats, de Bono uses an illustration of four people standing on four sides of large and beautiful country house. All four have a different view of the house and are arguing via an intercom that their view of the house is the correct view.

Parallel thinking, on the other hand requires the 4 people to all walk around, stop and look at the front, back and both sides of the house. In other words, it requires a moment in the thinking process where everyone is looking in the same direction. What might be the benefit to this approach?

Thinking hats – a metaphor for parallel thinking

The idea of a “thinking hat” or “thinking cap” is not unfamiliar to most of us. Dr. de Bono seized upon this metaphor and created what he called the “six thinking hats” model. There are six colored hats, each of which corresponds to six approaches or styles of thinking. Briefly, let’s note the characteristics of each.

- White
- Red
- Black
- Yellow
- Green
- Blue
Advantages of this approach

Before we look at each hat individually, it is important to understand why this approach is effective. Many national and international companies use or have used this approach. These include Prudential Insurance, IBM, Federal Express, British Airways, Polaroid, PepsiCo, DuPont, and Nippon Telephone & Telegraph. What makes this method attractive to these and other organizations? According to de Bono, there are several reasons. Here are some of them.

• Reduces the confusion that often accompanies thinking.

• Provides a disciplined process, creating more focus in one’s thinking.

• Requires individuals to look at all sides of an issue at the same time.

• Minimizes the role of ego.

• Leads to more constructive thinking.

• Provides guidelines for thinking.

• It’s simple to use.

Simply stated, the net effect of the “Six Hats” approach to thinking is that when used well, it improves communication and decision making.
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The white hat – “Just the facts, please”

When using the white hat, the focus is on information. Everyone should be concentrating on answering some fundamental questions like the following:

1. What information do we have?
2. What information do we need?
3. What is missing?
4. What questions need to be asked?
5. How do we get this information?

Key points to remember about the white hat:

• Often used toward beginning of the discussion.

• Concerned with facts and figures.

• Two levels:
  1. First class facts
  2. Second class facts

• The white hat challenges thinkers to be objective and neutral.

White hat thinking calls us to lay aside our traditional style of thinking that often begins with a conclusion and then offers “facts” to support that conclusion. Dr. de Bono compares white hat thinking to a “map-making type of thinking” where we first must make a map using facts, figures and information before choosing a route to take.
The red hat – “How do you feel about that?”

The red hat is concerned with feelings and emotions. As a general rule, the workplace tends to discourage emotions in our decision making. The truth is, they are present whether we recognize them or not. The red hat acknowledges the presence of emotions and provides an opportunity for them to be put forward and to be considered for their impact on our thinking and the decision-making process.

Key points to remember about the red hat:

- Provides legitimacy to emotions & feelings.
- Makes feelings visible so they can become a part of the thinking map.
- Red hat thinking includes:
  1. Ordinary emotions.
  2. Complex emotions like hunches and intuition.
- Affirms there is no need to explain or justify the feeling.

Red hat thinking should always be done on an individual basis. Red hat thinking allows open expression of feelings, emotions, fears, likes, dislikes, loves and hates. The feelings may be false but by getting them in the open they can be explored and factored into the process. As Dr. de Bono notes, any good decision will be emotional in the final analysis. So, why not be intentional about it?
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The black hat – “Here comes the judge”

The black hat is probably most used of all the hats or at least the one to which we are most naturally disposed. It plays an essential role in thinking. Unfortunately, we can misuse, overuse, and abuse the use of this hat—spending too much time trying to find fault in other’s ideas or positions. Under this approach, the black hat encourages thinkers to be cautious, to be careful and to be as critical as possible but just not at any and every point in a discussion or problem-solving session.

Key points to remember about the black hat:

- It’s a hat of survival.
- Its purpose is to identify difficulties & problems.
- Based on logic.
- Legitimizes the use of caution and critique.
- Examines both content and process.
- Black hat thinking is fundamentally about risk assessment.

Under black hat thinking the brain is oriented to think about potential dangers, problems and obstacles. It encourages thinkers to think cautiously and critically. It helps with the decision to go forward with an idea, identify weaknesses in an idea or proposed solution, or to abandon an idea that simply is not right or does not fit with the organization’s resources, policies, long term strategy, ethics or values.
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The yellow hat – “I think I can. I think I can…”

The yellow hat is the opposite of the black hat. If the black hat represents the logical negative, then the yellow hat represents the logical positive. In other words, the yellow hat is about finding the value and worth of an idea or proposed solution. It seeks to build a base for moving forward with an idea or proposed solution to a problem.

Key points to remember about the yellow hat:

- A deliberate search for the positive, for the benefit of an idea or proposed solution.

- It’s about the desire to make things happen.

- It should include the likelihood or possibility of an idea or suggestion.

- It includes speculation and opportunity thinking.

- Yellow hat thinking is constructive.

Yellow hat thinking is filled with the positive—it includes values, benefits, optimism, hope, opportunities, dreams and visions. It calls us to build, to strengthen, to support, to reach out and to reach forward. Yellow hat thinking is used to balance the effects of black hat or negative thinking. It also is concerned with getting the job done and finding effective ways of doing it. It is more than euphoria or good feelings (that would be the red hat). Every idea or potential solution deserves the constructive and positive direction that yellow hat thinking provides.
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The green hat – “Anything goes”

The green hat is concerned with new ideas; new ways of looking at things and Dr. de Bono calls it the “energy hat.” The green color is symbolic of fertility, vegetation, and growth. Its purpose is to move thinking forward into areas not yet considered or developed.

Key points to remember about the green hat:

• Used for creative thinking, putting forward new ideas and possibilities.

• It includes the search for alternatives and challenges us to go beyond the known, the obvious, and the satisfactory.

• It establishes that creative thinking is the business of everyone and communicates that expectation.

• It will use provocation as means of creating forward movement.

• The green hat is also used to overcome some of the difficulties put forward under the black hat.

The green hat, according to de Bono, may be more needed than any of the others. The green hat may not make people more creative but it does deliberately set aside time for creative thought and communicates the expectation that everyone should make an effort to come up with new ideas, alternatives and approaches to a problem or situation. In other words, it is the hat that encourages us to spend more time focused on creative thinking and the generation of new ideas and alternatives.
The blue hat – “Let’s think about thinking”

The blue hat, says Dr. de Bono, is like a conductor of an orchestra. The conductor “gets the best out of the orchestra by seeing that what should be done and is done at the right time.” In other words, the blue hat is for organizing and controlling the thinking process so that it is more productive. The blue hat sets the agenda for thinking.

Key points to remember about the blue hat:

• Under the blue hat our focus is on the thinking that is needed to explore a subject or problem. It includes:
  1. Instructions for thinking
  2. Organization of thinking
  3. Control of the other thinking hats

• Sets the focus for the thinking that is to occur.

• Monitors the thinking as it is unfolding.

• Used for requesting a certain hat or announcing a change of hats

• Responsible for overviews, summaries, conclusions and any necessary next steps.

The blue hat is the most formal of the hats. It is the control hat. It directs and maintains the thinking process. It enforces discipline among the thinkers. While anyone can offer blue hat comments or suggestions, it is often worn by one person who is facilitating or chairing the thinking session.
Let’s try on the Six Thinking Hats approach

To help illustrate this process, your facilitator will guide you in an activity, which is designed to give you a small taste of the Six Thinking Hats process.

Why this method can work

“Decisions seem to make themselves” when using this method and most would agree that anything we can do to facilitate smoother or more efficient decision making is a good thing. Using a common metaphor (i.e. putting on our thinking caps), this approach helps groups and work teams mutually explore a subject or problem in a parallel fashion. It creates a thinking map that helps with choosing the best road to take.

According to Dr. de Bono, the biggest enemy of thinking is confusion. The Six Thinking Hats has two main strengths to address this:

1. The first is to simplify thinking by allowing the thinker to take one thing at a time, to think in one direction at a time and at the same time others are thinking in this same direction.

2. It allows users a switch in thinking—to avoid persistent use or overuse of one thinking style. It becomes a very convenient way to switch someone’s thinking or to ask for a different type of thinking without offending the person. The game like qualities of the Six Thinking Hats model tends to minimize such reactions.

Two common questions

1. Which hat, if any, is better to start off a discussion or problem-solving session? Is there a preferred sequence of putting on the six hats?

2. What happens if after going through all the hats you have several good ideas on the table and you cannot come to a decision?

I believe Dr. de Bono's work in teaching people to think may be the most important thing happening in the world today.

George Gallup
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Don’t do this

1. Don’t use the hats as labels. (i.e. he’s a real black hat kind of guy)

2. Don’t assign hats to specific members of the team or group. Remember, the value is helping each member become skilled in looking in all directions—using all six hats.

A challenge

We end this presentation with a simple challenge. Try it. Start small but just try this approach in your workplace and see what happens.

References and Resources


http://debonoconsulting.com/training-courses/six-thinking-hats/ - Six Thinking Hats by the de Bono consulting group

http://www.debonogroup.com/six_thinking_hats.php - The de Bono Group and information about the Six Hats methods and seminars, including on-line training.

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Six Thinking Hats

It’s time to put on your thinking hats. The following exercise will give you an opportunity to try on five of the six thinking hats and get a small taste of how this approach works.

Situation: You have been assigned to a task force, charged with the responsibility of investigating the feasibility of replacing the current apartments on campus with more modern and cutting edge, medium sized dormitories. You have been informed that the administration wants these buildings to have significant visual impact and serve as an architectural focus point for your institution and the community. The architect has already been selected. She is known to have a flair for the unconventional. The photo below is an example of one of her recent projects and you have been told she has something in mind, even more dramatic and eye-catching for this project. Your charge is to determine if this proposed building plan should move forward. You are to discuss the issues using the Six Thinking Hats approach.

Task: You are to break into smaller groups. You will move through all of the thinking hats, with the exception of the blue hat. Your instructor will provide blue hat directions. As you work through the hats, it’s okay to have fun and to really get into the roles. Make this as real and relevant as you can. Just remember, everyone is to be wearing the same thinking hat at the same time and you are to remain in that hat until you are given instruction otherwise. It might be helpful for you to keep a few notes as your group works through each of the hats. These notes may prove useful when we discuss the exercise. You will be given a few minutes in each hat to think about the situation. After a period of time, your instructor will call time so we can discuss our reactions and observations about the Six Thinking Hats approach.
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### Six Thinking Hats

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thinking Hat</th>
<th>Hat Perspective</th>
<th>Focus of Discussion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td><strong>Information</strong> – What are the facts? What information do we have? What do we need? How will we get this information?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td><strong>Emotion</strong> – How do you feel about this? Any hunches or intuition about this? What does your “gut” tell you?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td><strong>Judgment</strong> – Why might this not work? What are the weaknesses? What risks comes with this? What are the dangers or problems you see?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td><strong>Optimism</strong> – Why might this work? What are its strengths, good points? What value might it add? What could be the benefits of this?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td><strong>Creativity</strong> – What are the possibilities here? What different approaches, alternatives or modifications might we consider?</td>
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