Six Thinking Hats ®

WHAT IT IS

The Six Thinking Hats tool is a powerful technique used to look at decisions from different points of view. This helps us move away from habitual thinking styles and towards a more rounded view of a situation.

There are six different imaginary hats that you can put on or take off. Each hat is a different colour and represents a different style of thinking.

When we change hats, we change our thinking.

THE PROCESS

You can use Six Thinking Hats on your own or in meetings, where it can minimize the confrontations that happen when people with different thinking styles discuss the same problem.

Each hat represents a different style of thinking:

White hat
Objective, neutral thinking in terms of facts, numbers and information.
With this thinking hat, you focus on the data available.

Red hat
Emotional, with judgements, suspicions and intuitions.
'Wearing' the red hat, you look at problems using intuition, gut reaction and emotion.

Black hat
Negative, sees risks and thinks about why something will not function. Using this hat, look cautiously and defensively at all the bad points of the decision. Try to see why it might not work.

Yellow hat
Positive, optimistic, clear, effective and constructive.
This hat helps you to think positively and to see all the benefits of the decision and the value in it.

Green hat
Creative, seeks alternatives. The green hat is where you can develop creative solutions to a problem. It is a freewheeling way of thinking, in which there is little criticism of ideas.

Blue hat
Or Meta hat, thinking about thinking.
The blue thinker's role is to keep an overview of what thinking is necessary to scout the subject.

BENEFITS

The main benefits of the Six Thinking Hats method are the following:

- allows you to say things without risk;
- generates understanding that there are multiple perspectives on an issue;
- is a convenient mechanism for "switching gears";
- focuses thinking;
- leads to more creative thinking;
- improves communication; and
- improves decision making.

KEY POINTS AND PRACTICAL TIPS

✔ This technique allows the necessary emotion and scepticism to be brought into what would otherwise be purely rational decisions, thus opening up an opportunity for creativity within decision making. It also helps, for example, persistently pessimistic people to be positive and creative.

✔ Plans developed using the Six Thinking Hats technique will be sounder and more resilient than would otherwise be the case. It may also help you to avoid public relations mistakes, and spot good reasons not to follow a course of action before you have committed to it.

✔ In a Six Thinking Hats session the facilitator must:
- define the focus of your thinking;
- plan the sequence and timing of the thinking;
- ask for changes in the thinking if needed;
- handle requests from the group for changes in the thinking; and
- capture periodic or final summaries of the thinking for consideration by the team.

✔ It is well worth reading Edward de Bono's book 6 Thinking Hats (see below) for more information on this technique.

FIND OUT MORE

– RAPID Toolkit - Tools for Knowledge and Learning: A guide for development and humanitarian organisations, Ben Ramalingam, July 2006
 www.odi.org.uk/Rapid/Publications/Documents/KM_toolkit_web.pdf

– EC-FAO Food Security Information for Action Programme e-learning course: Collaboration and Advocacy Techniques www.foodsec.org/DL

– Edward de Bono's own webpage www.edwdebono.com

– de Bono Consulting - Six Thinking Hats www.debononline.com/Six_Thinking_Hats.asp

– Mind Tools - Six Thinking Hats: Looking at a Decision From All Points of View www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_07.htm

– de Bono, E. (1999) Six Thinking Hats, New York: Back Bay Books

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This practical guide was developed to accompany the e-learning course entitled "Collaboration and Advocacy Techniques" published by the EC-FAO Food Security Information for Action Programme and available at www.foodsec.org. This guide and the associated e-learning materials are based on the ODI's Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme publication by Ben Ramalingam entitled "Tools for Knowledge and Learning: A guide for development and humanitarian organisations" available at www.odi.org.uk/rapid.