
Six Thinking Hats

Creativity toolkit:

The Six thinking hats

This is a technique developed by Edward de Bono, a management writer and consultant who has worked extensively on tools to enhance creativity. (His most famous work deals with the concept of *Lateral Thinking*). The idea behind the 6 hats approach is that people bring different approaches to the process of problem solving and there is value in developing flexibility in using all of these to help develop and refine ideas. Each has its associated strengths and weaknesses and all are needed to create and refine an idea to ensure it is novel, robust and useful.

The six thinking styles are each represented by a colour:

- White – this involves considering information, a neutral questioning approach which looks for information, evidence and facts surrounding the problem
- Red – emotional responses, feelings and reactions to and around the idea. These could be intuition (gut feeling and hunches), instinctive responses, reactions to an idea without any evidence or justification, simply how someone feels about it.
- Black - logical judgment, analysis of the facts and the emerging ideas, judgment based on careful consideration and evaluation, weighing up strengths and weaknesses of the idea.
- Yellow – logical optimistic assessment, looking for the benefits and synergies, asking ‘what’s good about it?’, bridging between ideas and their positive elements
- Green – creativity, suggesting and exploring in novel direction, using ‘wild ideas’, provoking and challenging, pushing the shape and form of emerging ideas, freewheeling around the problem but without judgment, allowing an ‘anything goes’ approach to thinking
- Blue – a meta-style which is aware of the other hats being worn and which can encourage switching between them. This is also about the overall goals and objectives of the problem-solving session – what is the issue on which people are focusing?

In order to train the skills of understanding and using the different thinking styles de Bono suggests wearing six different coloured hats which draw attention to the particular approach people are taking. So when the group is in freewheeling mode the green hat is worn, when someone makes a judgment the black hat, when someone asks for information the white hat, and so on. The idea is a little like a party game but it helps develop awareness of the different modes of thinking which operate in a group

problem-solving session and the value – or otherwise – of different modes. For example too much black hat judgment is likely to suppress interesting ideas early on and lead to cautious and conservative outcomes. Equally too much green behaviour is fun but may lack the focus to sharpen and develop the ideas emerging.

The core idea behind the approach is to develop awareness of the different styles but to encourage their use in a structured way – for example allowing a period of green behaviour and explicitly blocking off the natural tendency to judge (black behaviour) to allow novel ideas to emerge. Space can be given to exploring emotional responses (red behaviour) when ideas may emerge in the form of unsubstantiated hunches or gut feelings. This can be followed by an evaluation period looking to accentuate and explore positive aspects of the emerging ideas (yellow behaviour) before subjecting them to critical analysis to sharpen and focus them into implementable form (black behaviour).

The blue hat is associated with an overview of the whole process and an awareness of what is going on and how to switch between modes and avoid conflict in different styles. In early stages of training in the method the role of a facilitator is important in helping the group understand the different hats and when the behaviours which they represent are operating. This brings an element of structure and discipline to the process – for example allowing a ‘white’ phase of information seeking or switching to a ‘green’ phase of creative suggestion. Managing the timings and ensuring other hats are not being ‘worn’ when a particular phase is happening needs the intervention of an external facilitator who is managing the overall process of problem solving. As the group become more fluent so they are able to facilitate this for themselves.

There are many variants to using the hats but a typical process might involve a ‘blue hat’ phase in which the overall objectives of the session are outlined and the nature of the process (switching between hats) is explained and agreed upon. There is then an early period of evidence and information gathering (white hat) followed by a short period in which emotional reactions are surfaced (red hat). Alternating between creating and judging, switching between green, yellow and black hats can allow the emergence and development of novel and robust ideas.

Since most group problem solving is unstructured the use of physical hats quickly highlights the different and often conflicting styles which operate – and which may limit the effectiveness with which a group solves problems. The hats provide a fun way of developing awareness and training in a more structured approach. The process also gives a language which groups can use in subsequent problem solving sessions where the physical hats may no longer be needed.

The ideas behind the approach come from cognitive psychology and studies of how the brain uses different approaches in finding, exploring and solving problems. For example the role of instinctive gut feeling is important but it can also cloud judgment – the psychologist Daniel Kahnemann talks about two different modes of thinking (fast and slow) where the gut feeling mode provides rapid and sometimes insightful responses to challenging stimuli but where a more systematic analytic approach may lead to a better solution. Evidence suggests that the interplay of these different modes leads to higher quality and more novelty of ideas; they represent different tactics which can be deployed to

help improve the problem-solving process. de Bono's suggestion is that developing awareness of them and skills in switching between them can enhance creative-problem solving in a variety of situations.

The technique is widely used and more information can be found in de Bono's book:

de Bono, Edward (1985). *Six Thinking Hats: An Essential Approach to Business Management*. Little, Brown, & Company. [ISBN 0-316-17791-1](#) (hardback) and 0316178314 (paperback).

Or on various websites – see for example:

http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_07.htm

And a useful video here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjVxSk1MqO4>