

Tool 28: Six Thinking Hats

Aim of the tool

To look at a decision or problem from different perspectives to achieve a complete and rounded view of the situation.

When to use it?

In the Divergence stage, or Convergence stage, where the quality of analysis is crucial for the best possible decisions.

What are Six Thinking Hats?

This is a tool developed by Eduard De Bono (1999), which enables individuals in groups to look at a decision and its (potential) effects from different perspectives. Looking at a decision from different points of view, forces participants to think outside a habitual thinking style and helps to achieve a more rounded view of a situation.

As explained by Eduard De Bono:

“Thinking is the ultimate human resource. Yet we can never be satisfied with our most important skill. No matter how good we become, we should always want to be better. (...) The main difficulty of thinking is confusion. We try to do too much at once. Emotions, information, logic, hope and creativity all crowd in on us. It is like juggling with too many balls. What I am putting forward is a very simple concept which allows a thinker to do one thing at a time. He or she becomes able to separate emotion from logic, creativity from information, and so on. The concept is that of the six thinking hats. Putting on anyone of these hats defines a certain type of thinking. In the book I describe the nature and contribution of each type of thinking. The six thinking hats allow us to conduct our thinking as a conductor might lead an orchestra. We can call forth what we will. Similarly, in any meeting it is very useful to switch people out of their usual track in order to get them to think differently about the matter in hand.”

Each hat and the style of thinking it represents is described below:

Factual: Objective, neutral thinking in terms of facts, numbers and information. This thinking hat focuses on available data and information. It looks for knowledge gaps, and tries either to fill them or take account of them. For example, analysis past trends and extrapolating from historical data.

Emotional: Emotional, with judgments, suspicions and intuitions. ‘Wearing’ the red hat, one will look at problems using intuition, gut reaction and emotion. Also to understand other people’s responses.

Cautious: Negative, risk seeing and thinking about why something will not function. Using black hat thinking, one will look at all the bad points of the decision cautiously

and defensively. This hat is used to see why things might not work out, which is important to highlight the weak points in a plan. The weak points can then be eliminated or altered or a contingency plan can be drawn up to counter them. This makes plans more resilient and prepared for risks.

Logical: Positive, optimistic, clear, effective and constructive. The yellow thinker helps you to think positively and to put concrete suggestions on the table. It is the optimistic viewpoint that helps to see all benefits of the decision and the value in it. Yellow hat thinking helps to keep everyone going when everything looks gloomy and difficult.

Out of the box: 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. Provocation is an essential part of the green thinking. A whole range of creativity tools can help you here.

Management: Thinking about thinking. The blue thinker's role is to keep an overview of what kind of thinking is necessary at a certain moment in dealing with a problem. The blue hat thinker might request green hat thinking whenever running into difficulties because ideas are drying up. If contingency plans are needed, the blue hat will look for black hat thinking. The blue thinker is responsible for giving summaries, surveys and conclusions. The blue thinker keeps the discipline and brings the discussions back on to the right track. The blue hat stands for process control, worn by those who chair meetings.

Six Thinking Hats - Step by step

Both individuals and groups face challenges in making sound and resilient decisions. In MSPs we often see weak group decision making because the issues discussed are very complex (wicked problems), and because different stakeholders do not speak the same language.

Six thinking hats can help to improve this. In groups, it works best to have six colours of hats or caps available. Facilitators can engage people by asking questions like: "Could we look at the new government policy x from a white hat perspective? Who wants to start?" or "We have heard some great red and yellow hat contributions now... let's see if there are black hat contributions to the issue of y".

When using the hat model there are a number of key points:

- Putting on and taking off the hats (metaphorically) enables a thinker to be able to switch roles.
- The hats are not meant to put people into categories. It is totally wrong to say, "She's a green hat thinker" or "He only uses the red hat."
- The purpose and value of the six hats method is to get people to use all six modes of thinking.
- Hat thinking can detach your ego from the thinking. De Bono suggests that "our egos get attached to an idea or an argument. We cannot stand back in order to be objective".

Learn more

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

Mind Tools, see: <http://www.mindtools.com/pages/videos/six-thinking-hats-transcript.htm>.

Simon Batchelor (1996) The six thinking hat model — a tool for participation in community development, the experience of an NGO in Cambodia. European Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension Volume 3, Issue 3.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13892249685300321>

This MSP Tool Guide is curated by WUR, but we recognize that many of the tools included are in the public domain or credited to other authors. Where relevant, they are referenced in the 'Learn more' section.