

The Six Thinking Hats

How do you get time for creative thinking?

How can you ask someone to make some creative effort?

How do you stop someone from being persistently negative?

How do you encourage people to look at the benefits of an idea?

How do you express your intuition and gut feeling in a serious meeting?

The six thinking hats method is extremely simple but it is powerful simplicity.

There was a breakfast meeting in Tokyo to launch the Japanese translation of the book *Six Thinking Hats*.^{*} At this meeting were the chief executives of some of the best known Japanese corporations, including Mr. Hisashi Shinto, who was chief executive of NTT (Nippon Telephone and Telegraph). He had just been chosen as Japanese businessman of the year for his feat in privatizing this giant organization. At that time NTT had 350,000 employees and in stock market valuation was worth more than the top five U.S. corporations put together. Mr. Shinto liked the idea of the six hats and asked his executives to read the book. I met him again six months later and he told me the method had had a powerful effect on his executives who were now more creative and more constructive. He asked me to give a talk to his board and also to the top managers in NTT.

In 1990, IBM used the six hat method as part of the core of their training for their 40,000 managers worldwide. The method is widely used by Du Pont, Prudential, and many other major corporations. It is used because it is practical and makes a difference.

The method is fully described in the book *Six Thinking Hats*, and instruction in the training of the method is also available.[†]

^{*}Little, Brown, New York, 1986, and also ICCT, New York. Published in London by Penguin Books.

[†]For training in the method please contact Kathy Myers, APT/T, Fax (515) 278-2245.

For the sake of completeness I shall give a simple overview of the method here.

WHITE HAT

Think of white paper, which is neutral and carries information. The white hat has to do with data and information.

What information do we have here?

What information is missing?

What information would we like to have?

How are we going to get the information?

When you ask for white hat thinking at a meeting you are asking those present to put aside the proposals and arguments and to focus directly on the information. For the moment everyone at the meeting looks to see what information is available, what is needed, and how it might be obtained.

RED HAT

Think of red and fire and warm.

The red hat has to do with feelings, intuition, hunches, and emotions.

In a serious meeting you are not supposed to put forward your emotions, but people do this by disguising their emotions as logic.

The red hat gives people permission to put forward their feelings and intuitions without apology, without explanation, and without any need to justify them.

... Putting on my red hat, this is what I feel about the project.

... My gut-feeling is that it will not work.

... I don't like the way this is being done.

... My intuition tells me that prices will fall soon.

Because the red hat "signals" feelings as such, they can come into the discussion without pretending to be anything else. Intu-

ition may be a composite judgment based on years of experience in the field and may be very valuable even if the reasons behind the intuition cannot be spelled out consciously. It should also be said that intuition is not always right, and it can be wrong.

It is sometimes valuable to get feelings out into the open.

BLACK HAT

Think of a stern judge wearing black robes who comes down heavily on wrong-doers.

The black hat is the "caution" hat.

The black hat prevents us from making mistakes, doing silly things, and doing things which might be illegal.

The black hat is for critical judgment.

The black hat points out why something cannot be done.

The black hat points out why something will not be profitable.

... The regulations do not permit us to do that.

... We do not have the production capacity to meet that order.

... When we tried a higher price the sales fell off.

... He has no experience in export management.

Mistakes can be disastrous. No one wants to make mistakes or do silly things. So the black hat is very valuable. It is the most used hat and possibly the most useful hat.

At the same time it is very easy to overuse the black hat. Some people feel that it is enough to be cautious and negative and that if you prevent all mistakes then everything will be fine. It is easy to kill creative ideas with early negativity. Wine is fine but overuse of alcohol can turn you into an alcoholic. It is the same with the black hat. The hat is very valuable but overuse of it can be a problem.

YELLOW HAT

Think of sunshine.

The yellow hat is for optimism and the logical positive view of things.

The yellow hat looks for feasibility and how something can be done.

The yellow hat looks for benefits—but they must be logically based.

- ... This might work if we moved the production plant nearer to the customers.
- ... The benefit would come from repeat purchases.
- ... The high cost of energy would make everyone more energy efficient.

The black hat is much more natural than the yellow hat because we need to avoid mistakes and danger for survival. Yellow hat thinking often requires a deliberate effort. Benefits are not always immediately obvious and we might have to search for them. Every creative idea deserves some yellow hat attention.

GREEN HAT

Think of vegetation and rich growth.

The green hat is for creative thinking.

The green hat is for new ideas.

The green hat is for additional alternatives.

The green hat is for putting forward possibilities and hypotheses.

The green hat covers “provocation” and “movement” (to be described later).

The green hat requests creative effort.

- ... We need some new ideas here.
- ... Are there any additional alternatives?
- ... Could we do this in a different way?
- ... Could there be another explanation?

The green hat makes it possible to ask directly for a creative effort. The green hat makes time and space available for creative thinking. Even if no creative ideas are forthcoming, the green hat asks for the creative effort.

BLUE HAT

Think of the sky and an overview.

The blue hat is for process-control. The blue hat thinks about the thinking being used.

The blue hat sets the agenda for thinking.

The blue hat suggests the next step in the thinking.

The blue hat can ask for other hats.

The blue hat asks for summaries, conclusions, and decisions.

The blue hat can comment on the thinking being used.

- ... We have spent far too much time looking for someone to blame.
- ... Could we have a summary of your views?
- ... I think we should take a look at the priorities.
- ... I suggest we try some green hat thinking to get some new ideas.

The blue hat is usually used by the chairperson or the organizer of the meeting, but other participants can put forward suggestions. The blue hat is for organizing and controlling the thinking process so that it becomes more productive. The blue hat is for thinking about thinking.

INSTEAD OF ARGUMENT

The Western tradition of argument insists that we try to move forward by means of position taking and argument. “A” has a point of view and “B” disagrees. The ensuing argument is supposed to give adequate exploration of the subject. Too often the protagonists get locked into their positions and become more interested in winning or losing the argument than in exploring the subject.

The six hats method allows us to get right away from argument in order to get more productive discussions. Both “A” and “B” can wear the black hat at the same time to find out the dangers. Both “A” and “B” can wear the yellow hat to explore the benefits. Both “A” and “B” can wear the green hat to open up possibilities. Instead of adversarial thinking there is cooperative exploration. That is why the method has been so eagerly taken up by those who have to run meetings. At last there is a way of breaking free from the traditional argument system.

EGO AND PERFORMANCE

Usually ego and performance in thinking are too closely bound together. Someone who does not like an idea will not make any effort to find points in favor of the idea—and the other way around. The hat method separates ego from performance. The thinker is challenged to use the different hats and actually experiences a sense of freedom because the thinker is no longer limited to one position.

A person who does not like an idea will now make an effort under the yellow hat to find some benefits. A person who is enthusiastic about an idea will be asked to look at the difficulties under the black hat. With the hats, quite often the thinker comes up with insights that change his or her opinion in the matter.

PERSISTENT NEGATIVITY

Some people are cautious by nature and feel that at every moment they have to put forward the possible dangers. In a normal discussion there is nothing to stop a person being persistently negative. With the hat system there is ample opportunity to be negative at the right moment (under the black hat) but at other times negativity is out of place. In this way the natural dominance of the black hat is reduced.

If a person is being negative, you say, "That is good black hat thinking; let us have some more of it." Then after a while you say, "We have had a lot of black hat thinking—now let's try some green hat thinking." The black hat wearer must now keep quiet or make a green hat effort.

SPACE FOR POSITIVE AND CREATIVE THINKING

The yellow and green hats make it possible to allocate time for deliberative creative effort and also a positive effort. I have seen Ron Barbaro, president of Prudential, listen to someone telling him why something cannot be done. After a while Ron would say: "Now for the yellow hat."

It is not natural to allow time for creativity. It is not natural to allow time for positive thinking unless we happen to like the idea. But once we do make the deliberate effort, this effort can be well

rewarded. The natural flow of thinking and discussion allows insufficient time for creative effort (unless an idea immediately comes to mind) and insufficient time for a positive effort.

GAME

The more you invest in the six hats method as a "game" the more powerful the method becomes. People feel very foolish if they are seen not to be playing the game. If everyone is making a yellow hat effort then the person who comes out with some black hat comment feels out of place. If you invest in the game (using the hat colors) when you do not really need it then the method is available for use when you do really need it: fierce arguments, crises, conflicts, dogmatic views, and so on.

NOT CATEGORIES

It is perfectly true that some people are much better at one type of thinking than another. It is perfectly true that some people are much more comfortable with one type of thinking rather than another. But I want to emphasise very strongly that the hats are not categories or descriptions. I do not want someone considering himself "the black hat thinker in this group." I do not want someone considering herself "the green hat thinker in this group." That is exactly the opposite of the purpose of the six hats. Everyone must make an "effort" to use all of the hats. When a group is doing green hat thinking then everyone is "wearing" the green hat at that time. If a person chooses to keep quiet at all times other than when his or her favorite hat is in use then that person can be asked directly for some "green hat views" or "yellow hat views."

It is only too easy to see the hats as categories. They are categories of thinking behavior, but not of people. Just as every golfer needs to attempt to use all clubs, so every thinker must attempt to use all six hats.

OCCASIONAL USE

The most frequent use of the hats is the "occasional" use. This means that you ask for one hat at a time. This is to request a

certain type of thinking or to change out of a certain type of thinking. Before the use of the hat there is a normal discussion and after the use of the hat there is again normal discussion. A single hat is used as a convenient way to switch thinking. You can ask another person to put on or take off a particular hat. You can announce that you are putting on a particular hat ("Putting on my black hat, these are the difficulties I foresee"). You can ask a whole group to put on a particular hat ("I think it is time we had some green hat thinking. We need some new ideas").

The great virtue of the six hat method is that you can switch thinking immediately and without offense. If you tell someone to stop being "so negative" that person is likely to be offended. But if you ask that person to "try the yellow hat" then there is no offense.

After a while the six hats become part of corporate culture and are used freely and automatically to ask for different types of thinking.

SYSTEMATIC USE

There are times when a group, or an individual, wants a quick exploration of a subject. This can be done by putting together a formal sequence of the hats and then going through them, one by one, spending about four minutes on each hat.

There is no one correct sequence because the sequence will vary with the subject, whether it has been considered before, and who is doing the thinking. There are some formal guidelines that may help to select the sequence. For example, it is useful to use the black hat towards the end to seek out difficulties and dangers and to see whether the proposed idea is viable. This should then be followed with the red hat, which allows someone to say: "In its present form this idea will not work, but I still feel the idea has potential. So let us try to find a way of making it work." This allows a "feeling" to prevent total dismissal of an idea that in its present form is not usable. These guidelines would only be confusing at this point because readers would be forever trying to remember the correct sequence. The guidelines are more properly given in the formal training on the use of the six thinking hats.* For practical purposes it is enough to agree

on a sequence that seems sensible and then to use it. This gives good results.

I shall be returning to the six hats method in the Applications part of the book.