

Most of the materials in this post are taken from Edward de Bono, who is quite an expert in the field of thinking

The Six Hats of Thinking

Introduction

Without us realizing it, most of us have a more-or-less defined role. Some of us are optimists, and would always produce reasons of why something can work or turn out well. Some of us are so-very-cautious, and every step forward requires some prolonged contemplation.

Most of us are something of everything but we tend to lean towards a certain direction of thinking.

The major reason for this is that it is difficult to do two things at one time. Imagine balancing a big book on the top of your head, juggling with two balls with your left hand and unwrapping chocolate bar with your right hand. The same is true for thinking. It is hard to be objective and subjective towards an issue, but both are necessary. It is hard to be critical and optimistic about an idea, and again, both are necessary.

In the end, when there is no framework for us to do our thinking, we tend to lead towards the type of thinking in which we are most comfortable with. The results, although valid, are usually just a narrow view of the overall issue.

The six thinking hats is a method to do one sort of thinking at a time. Instead of trying to do everything at once we 'wear' only one hat at a time.

In image processing technology (TV, camera, printing), colours are treated separately before combined together to give a full-colour picture. If a colour is missing (malfunctioning sensors, empty cartridges), we would only have a tainted picture (imagine a bluish picture). If only a colour is used, we would only have a picture lacking in details and dimensions (imagine a black-white picture). Analogically each type of thinking should be processed separately before combining them together for full-colour thinking.

About hats

It's important to note that hats are something easily put on or taken off. It's not permanently attached to you. This is important because each one must be able to take off and put on each of the hats.

Hats are not accessories, not categories. It's wrong to say: "She is a green-hat thinker". Instead of labelling people and putting them into boxes the hats are there to encourage people to use all types of thinking.

The White Hat

Think of white as a blank paper, ready to contain data and information. The white hat means neutral information.

1. What information do we have?
2. What information is missing?
3. How do we get the information we need?

The information may be facts, figures, lists, statistics etc. It can be obvious and direct but can also be deduced.

The Red Hat

Think of fire and warm. The red hat is for emotions, feelings, hunches and intuition.

As the white hat is about objective facts, the red hat is about subjective feelings. Feelings are a very important part of thinking, often times are decisions based of feelings.

The red hat allows the people to put forward our feelings as a part of the thinking *without* justification. "I have a bad-feeling about this but I can't explain it" is a valid red-hat statement.

Red hat is permission to put forward feelings, intuitions etc. without the need to justify it. Feelings are valuable as long as they are labelled as such.

Information and Feeling

It's important to differentiate between information and feelings. Statements like "I feel that this product will sell" but without any backing are red-hat statements. "I feel that the product will sell due to past sales trends and datas" is a white-hat statement.

Statements like "Miss Goh does not like this idea" are white-hat statements because it simply puts down the fact that someone opposes the idea. On the other hand, "I don't like this idea" is a red-hat statement.

The Black Hat

Think of a stern judge. The black hat is concerned with truth and reality. It is about critical thinking. Questions asked by black hat are:

1. Is it true?
2. Does it fit?
3. Will it work?
4. What are the dangers and problems?

The Yellow Hat

Think of sunshine. The yellow hat is full of hope and optimism. It looks into the future, the postives and the benefits. Questions asked by yellow hat are:

1. What are the benefits?
2. Why should it work?

Logical reasoning

The black and the yellow hat are both logical hats. The reasons behind the assessments must be given. If there are no reasons, you should be using the red hat, because a statement without reasons is a feeling or intuition.

Over-use

Some people want to be cautious and negative all the time. They are always ready to point out why something will not work or cannot be done. This does not mean that the black hat is a 'bad hat'. Some salt on food is good, too much salt is bad. Over-use of the black hat does not make it a bad hat.

On the other hand, there are people who get carried away by an idea and plunge ahead without facing the realities and practicalities. This is not so much over-use of the yellow hat as failure to use the black hat.

The Green Hat

Think of grass, trees and growth. Think of the energy of growth and fertility. The green hat is the 'active' (not reactive) hat, it is the creative hat.

The white hat lays out the information. The red hat allows feelings to be put forward. The black and yellow hats deal with logical assessment. So it falls to the green hat to be the action hat under ideas are put forward.

The five main uses of the green hat are as follows:

1. Exploration
2. Proposals and suggestions
3. Alternatives
4. New ideas
5. Provocations

The Blue Hat

Think of the blue sky. The sky is above everything. With blue-hat thinking you are above the thinking, you are thinking about thinking. Blue hat is the overview and the process control.

Areas covered by the blue hat are:

1. Where are we now?
2. What is the next step?
3. Programm for thinking
4. Summary
5. Observation and comment

Sequence

There is no single correct sequence because it will vary with the circumstances. Some of the guidelines are:

1. Each hat may be used by any number of times in the sequence.
2. In general it is best to use the yellow hat before the black hat since it is difficult to be positive after you have been critical.
3. The black hat is used in two ways. The first way is to point out the weaknesses in an idea. This should then be followed by the green hat, which tries to overcome the weakness. The second use of the black hat is for assessment.
4. The black hat is always used for final assessment of the idea. The final assessment should be always be followed by the red hat. This is so that we can see how we feel about the idea after we have assessed it.
5. If you believe there are strong feelings about a subject, you always start the thinking with the red hat in order to get those feelings out into the open. Or else the white hat is used to gather information.

Example:

When seeking an idea: White -> Green -> Yellow -> Black -> Green -> Blue -> Black -> Red

When reacting to an idea -> Red -> Yellow -> Black -> Green -> White -> Green -> Black -> Red