

Six Thinking Hats - By Sandi Spivey

2007-08-21

What makes a twelve-dollar hamburger worth twelve dollars? Hint: It's not just the Certified Angus Beef.

Have you ever thought that your job would be easier if everyone just thought like you? The truth is, it might be. But the most creative ideas - and the best teamwork - are actually the result of different types of thinking. Six different types, to be specific. The 'Six Thinking Hats' system clearly defines each of these thinking styles - and demonstrates how, when we use each style at the appropriate time, they can work together to create more innovative solutions than we ever thought possible. This concept comes from Edward de Bono who authored the book "The Six Think Hats".

What are the 'Six Thinking Hats'? It's simplest to think of them in terms of color.

White Hat: This type of thinking is focused on data. What information do you have? What can you learn from it? What information are you missing?

Red Hat: Wearing the red hat, you look at problems using your own intuition, gut reaction and emotion. You might also try to imagine how other people are reacting emotionally.

Black Hat: With black hat thinking, you look at all the potential bad points of a decision. You look at things cautiously and defensively, so you'll notice the weak points in a plan - which allows you to eliminate them.

Yellow Hat: This is the positive thinking hat. You have an optimistic viewpoint that helps you to see all the benefits of a decision. Yellow Hat thinking helps you to keep going when everything looks gloomy.

Green Hat: The Green Hat stands for creativity. You develop innovative solutions to a problem, without criticism or regard for what's 'possible.'

Blue Hat: The Blue Hat stands for process control. The person chairing the meeting or managing the project typically wears this hat. Blue hat thinkers decide when the team needs to "wear" which color hat, so that the situation can be discussed from several viewpoints.

The 'Six Thinking Hats' system is not a personality profiling tool. While you can use an assessment to determine the hat (or hats) in which you are most comfortable (and you'll find one at the end of this article), the idea is not to identify or assign a particular style of thinking to each person in a meeting or on a project team. The idea is for everyone to put on each 'hat' at the same time: to respond emotionally, to generate ideas, to troubleshoot, to problem-solve, to analyze, to organize. When you can do this - and recognize that some members of the group will always be operating 'under' a hat that doesn't come naturally - you can begin to solve problems as a team.

Imagine a large and beautiful house. One person is standing in front of the house. One person is standing behind the house. Two other people are standing on each side of the house. All four have different views of the house, and all four are arguing (by walkie-talkie) that his or her view is the correct one.

This is an example of adversarial thinking - the kind that often goes on when different personality types work together. With Parallel thinking, which is what the 'Six Thinking Hats' system employs, all four of these people would walk around and look at the front. Then they would all walk around to the side, then the back, and finally the remaining side. So at each moment each person is looking at the same thing from the same point of view.

Why is this a good idea? First and foremost, getting people to think differently can pull them out of thinking 'ruts.' But a rut, by its very nature, is easy to fall into. When you ask a whole group to think the same way at the same time, the individuals in that group can help keep each other on track, so everybody wins. In addition, this approach...

Removes ego and 'turf' protection from the equation,

Allows people to 'flex' their thinking styles,

Allows time for creative thinking,

Inhibits the tendency to be adversarial.

The key to making this work is simple: Remember that thought patterns are not personal - they're just thought patterns. And we can talk about someone's thought patterns personally attacking that person. It is also important to remember that each thinking style is valuable and serves an important purpose.

Consider the following example:

The leaders of your hotel company are deciding whether or not they should start construction on a new property this year. They decide to use the 'Six Thinking Hats' method during a planning meeting.

Wearing White Hats, they analyze the data they have. They look at real estate trends, which show that good sites are getting more expensive and harder to find. On the positive side, projections indicate that the economy will continue to get stronger. People will travel more, and the demand for rooms will go up.

When they switch to Red Hats, some of the directors think the proposed hotel design looks ugly. While it would be highly cost-effective to build - and the rooms themselves would be luxurious - they worry that the outside appearance will keep guests away.

With Black Hats on, they worry that the economic projections may be wrong, and hotel rooms may not be in huge demand. If the building exterior is not attractive, guest will have a lot of other options to choose from.

Yellow Hats, however, make our planners see the bright side: If the economy holds up and their projections are correct, the company stands to make a great deal of money. And if they establish the property's rating before the next downturn, they can have a loyal guest following that will outlast any recession.

With Green Hat thinking, they consider possibilities for making the hotel exterior more attractive. They also look at alternatives, like adding on rooms to existing properties, rather than opening a brand-new hotel.

Throughout this process, the Blue Hat has been used by the department head to move between the different thinking styles. He or she may have needed to keep other members of the team from switching styles, or from criticizing other peoples' points.

So...will they decide to build the hotel? It's hard to say. But one thing is certain: Whatever plan they agree to, it will be sounder and more resilient than one developed another way. That's the magic of the 'Six Thinking Hats.'

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