

## **Six Thinking Hats**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this article the author is trying to throw some light on how the individual thinking and group thinking process (meetings / group discussions) for decision making is a practical issue, how to overcome the same and how the human brain works in 6 different methods that can be sensitized to make the brain think in a particular direction for clarity of thoughts and effective decision making. The Six Thinking Hats<sup>®</sup> can be applied to group thinking and at an individual level as well to achieve fantastic results.

**Key words:** Six Thinking Hats, Parallel Thinking, Effective Decision Making

### **1. Introduction**

Ever felt stuck in a meeting / discussion? Wanted to just walk out of a meeting room? Stuck for ages in a directionless meeting and no decisions are ever being made? We all have faced such a situation sometime in our life. Most of the times, when people enter meetings, they dread! Why? Because chances are that this meeting won't come to any conclusion and the discussion will be without any logical end. The only thing decided will be the 'date' for the next meeting ☺ and most of everybody's time will be a complete waste!

A close friend recently told me that he was stuck in a meeting which lasted for one and a half hour without any decision being made. The only decision made was deciding on the date of next meeting. Amongst the participants, they had two power centers (powerful / Authoritative people) and they started talking against each other's points where no one else could interfere and this lead to unproductive discussions and waste of everyone's time. Such instances have been eating up so much time and productivity of managers that an entire industry has sprung up over the past 20 years focussing on 'Meeting Management' We all have heard about John Trosko, a professional organiser, blogger, contributing author, business owner and Founder / President of OrganisingLA. He instituted the concept of 'stand-up' meetings by taking off the chairs from the meeting room and ran the meetings standing; which resulted in the average meeting time drastically reducing to half. No, I am not surprised with the fantastic result! Who would want to stand in a meeting and discuss non-productive out of agenda items as against traditional cozy luxury chairs with tea / coffee and biscuits. But in India, can we really implement this strategy??? May be not so easily! But definitely worth a shot – provided we have our management approvals (and if they are willing to stand as well)

Sometimes even when teams are not involved (Individual thinking) and we are going through a thinking process, we are not able to think clearly, (*Example: Which stream to opt for after completion of standard 10<sup>th</sup> or after graduation, should one go for MBA or CA or any other degree, which specialization to go in the second year of MBA, what type of job to choose*)

after MBA?) These are practical questions that all of us come across in our lives and we wish we could think more clearly to get a solution. But why only wish when it can be achieved easily. Not only these simple questions, but many more high level decisions can be thought about with more clarity of mind and in a structured manner (*Global expansion, new product launch, discontinuing an existing product / brand, how to apply funds when there are more than one options available in hand, Succession planning, etc*). In a Group decision making process, all the decision makers can be made to think in one single direction at a time to achieve amazing results.

## **2. Literature review**

There are a lot of tools / techniques globally available which help us conduct or organize a good meeting. One of the most common methods of structuring the meeting is:

1. Set clear objectives
2. Create an agenda and circulate well in advance
3. Invite the right number and the right people
4. Focus on the discussion point
5. Act as a policemen (to bring back all on track)
6. Circulate minutes of the meet with clear ownership on action points

Another way is to calculate and show the cost of people involved in the meeting. Example: if 10 people are involved in a meeting with an average salary of Rs. 15,00,000/ then the meeting would cost roughly Rs. 4,629/- per hour

All these techniques focus on how to conduct a structured / short meeting or how to engage everyone to discuss and focus on the agenda item. But they don't discuss on how to help structure the thinking process. There are yet some more techniques that even focus on structuring our 'thinking'. Techniques such as "ASIT (Advanced Systematic Inventive Thinking)", "X-type and Y-type thinking", "TRIZ", "Top Down and Bottom Up", "Cause and Effect Thinking", "Toyota's five times WHYs", and another world recognized technique is 'Six Thinking Hat' introduced to mankind by Sir Edward de Bono.

This technique is a thinking tool for group discussion and individual thinking. Combined with the idea of parallel thinking which is associated with it, it provides a means for groups and individuals to think more effectively, and a means to plan the thinking processes in a detailed and cohesive way.

The premise of this technique is that the human brain is designed to think in 6 different manners when it comes across a decision making process (Thinking Process). These Six different patterns in which a human brain "thinks" can be deliberately sensitized and humans can be made to think in a particular direction. In each of these states the brain will identify and bring into conscious thought certain aspects of issues being considered (*Example: gut instinct, pessimistic judgment, neutral facts, etc.*) Imagine when this happens, how far reaching the results will be! Now imagine a group of people who follow this pattern and are deliberately made to think in one direction – all at the same time. No stone will remain unturned. This technique, called Six Thinking Hats, was devised by Dr. Edward de Bono in 1985

In this technique we will come across six different hats (imaginary hats, not actual ones that can be physically worn). Each hat symbolizes something unique and that is how it has derived its color. Think about a clean slate – an open mind where all facts can be written as they are. Its neutral and it won't try to make a decision at all. It's just facts as they are. This is the function of the white hat. Globally, the color red symbolizes feelings – same is the function of the red hat. It symbolizes the feelings of the participants / thinkers without being obliged to provide any reasoning or logic. Think about a Judge wearing a black cloak who would come down heavily on someone on the wrong side of the law. The black hat is for caution and looks out for traps / pitfalls. A very important hat indeed! The sunshine shows perpetual hope and optimism – this is the very significance of the yellow hat. Man is always in search of greener pastures in life – personally and professionally. Green always symbolizes growth. It gives birth to new ideas and creativity. Creativity in thinking is what we are looking at in this process. This is the work of the green hat. We all need an overview and some amount of control. This is the work of the blue hat, obviously the color of the sky. This is to organize the thinking process and making it more effective.

These hats are to be worn by all participants / thinkers at the same time to ensure effectiveness. One would obviously think that the transition from one mode of thinking to another is going to be a painful process – how to force our minds to think in a particular manner??? And all of a sudden change from one particular mode of thinking to another – from one direction to another completely different direction? But in fact, once this technique is adopted in life, the transition is so smooth that the participants will be amazed on how the brain reacts and moves on from one mode of thinking to another so easily.

At first, even I had the same feeling that such a transition would be difficult to follow asking our brain to switch over from one style of thinking to another within seconds, but when I attended a workshop conducted by one of the trainers who has been personally trained by Dr. Edward de Bono, I was amazed to see the results – even more amazed to see how my brain behaved and responded while wearing each hat and while transitioning from one hat to another (one pattern / direction of thinking to another).

One should not mistake that this technique is for people working in offices only, students can equally benefit from this. Some practical examples from my research sample interaction with management students in Mumbai: This technique helped them in deciding which stream to opt for in their second year of specialization in MBA, which project to go for in their summer project, which job offer should they take after completing their MBA and to my surprise one of the students responded by saying that this technique helped him to decide on which girlfriend to choose! ☺

Let's have a deeper look at this technique and each hat:

The six distinct states in which the brain thinks are portrayed using six different colored hats giving a particular direction to think. This method separates ego from performance and helps to think in one common direction at the same time and facilitates decision making. These are metaphorical hats and not actual physical hats that are required to be worn and changed from time to time. The transition from one hat to another (one direction to another) is to be deliberately done and once a person is familiar with the technique, this transition in thinking pattern / direction becomes very smooth. And when done in a group, everyone wears the same hat at the same time.



### **White Thinking Hat**

Once you are wearing this hat, you only think about facts, figures, data, MIS, true and actual information. In a group, wearing this hat would mean no arguments, no biased opinion – just collecting all the facts and figures and keeping them on the table. No analysis of the facts as well. Only pure collection of data should be done here. This is a very fundamental hat – as without collection of facts and data, no decision should ever be made! While collection of data no arguments or challenging the data should be done. Our objective is to get all the data collected and be laid in front of us.



### **Red Thinking Hat**

Once you are wearing this hat, you let out your emotions. The person wearing a red hat is supposed to let out his / her feelings to all – without being obliged to give an explanation for his views. This is very important and should be followed. No one should be asked to support his feelings or give an explanation on why he feels the way he feels. Each thinker wearing this hat is entitled to express his feelings without the liability to provide a justification or logic. This is the gut feeling.



### **Black Thinking Hat**

This is a very important hat – most often the black hat is misunderstood for being a bad hat. This hat plays a role of caution and critical evaluation. This is not a bad hat; it allows the thinker to put forth their word of caution. Reasons why a particular idea won't take off, or why an idea will fail / won't be implemented, etc. why do the facts don't support the 'go-ahead' on the idea under discussion. But one should avoid falling into a trap of using this hat too much. It should not be over-used.



### **Yellow Thinking Hat**

This is the hat of optimism and positivity. Wearing this hat, the user will put forth the strengths and benefits of implementing the idea / topic of discussion. This requires a deliberate effort on the part of the users in putting down the benefits.



### **Green Thinking Hat**

The creativity hat! The thinker wearing this hat has to come out with alternative & creative new solution ideas. When used in a group, all the participants have to come out with creative and alternative ideas.



### Blue Thinking Hat

This is the control hat, usually used by the chairperson of the meeting or a person nominated by the chairperson. The person wearing this hat has to control the conduct of the meeting.



This is for organizing the thinking process to make it more effective.

### 3. Conclusion

Just by reading about this technique, one can misunderstand that it won't be easy to transition our mind from one hat to another (from one pattern of thinking to another) like a machine or a robot, but in practice, it is a lot easier.

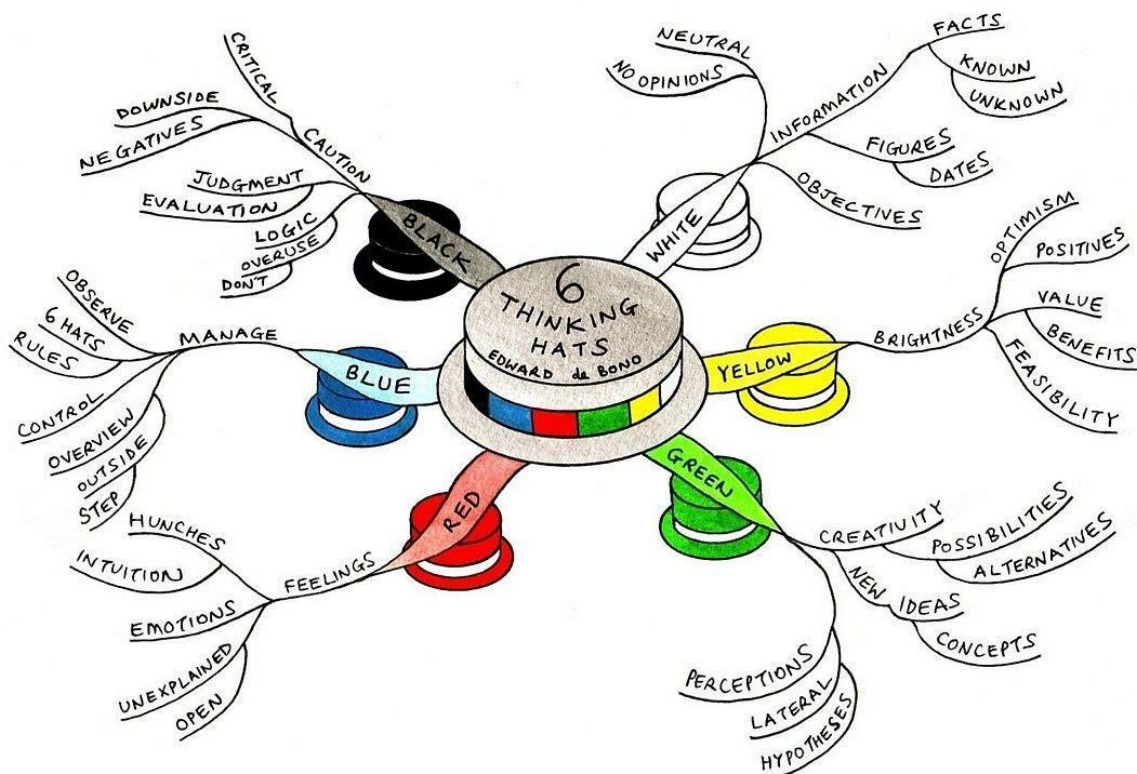


Figure 1: 6 thinking hats

This technique was also applied in our Indian Cricket Team as well by the then coach and it fetched amazing results. This technique need not only be used in professional life, this is equally effective in personal life as well.

All this can be done by using a simple yet highly powerful tool, Six Thinking Hats ®

The author in his doctorate research studies plans to interview top CEOs in the Indian Banking and Financial Services Sector to establish if Six Thinking Hats® can indeed be applied in today's thinking process / decision making process and gauge its effectiveness in the boardroom. And if not, is there a better technique to structure the thought processes adopted by our leaders (CEOs) which can be applied by us all and can also act as a reference point for all future leaders.

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