

Six Thinking Hats

Looking at a Decision From All Points of View

The different hats:

1. White hat – focus on data
2. Red hat – look at problem using intuition – gut
3. Black hat – pessimistic – look at all the negatives
4. Yellow hat – look at everything that could go right
5. Green hat – creativity – let your imagination run wild – put inner critic on hold
6. Blue hat – process control – use this with a group if the group is stuck in one of the above

'Six Thinking Hats' is an important and powerful technique. It is used to look at decisions from a number of important perspectives. This forces you to move outside your habitual thinking style, and helps you to get a more rounded view of a situation.

Many successful people think from a very rational, positive viewpoint. This is part of the reason that they are successful. Often, though, they may fail to look at a problem from an emotional, intuitive, creative or negative viewpoint. This can mean that they underestimate resistance to plans, fail to make creative leaps and do not make essential contingency plans.

Similarly, pessimists may be excessively defensive, and more emotional people may fail to look at decisions calmly and rationally.

If you look at a problem with the 'Six Thinking Hats' technique, then you will solve it using all approaches. Your decisions and plans will mix ambition, skill in execution, public sensitivity, creativity and good contingency planning.

How to Use the Tool

You can use Six Thinking Hats in meetings or on your own. In meetings it has the benefit of blocking the confrontations that happen when people with different thinking styles discuss the same problem.

White Hat:

With this thinking hat you focus on the data available. Look at the information you have, and see what you can learn from it. Look for gaps in your knowledge, and either try to fill them or take account of them.

This is where you analyse past trends, and try to extrapolate from historical data.

Red Hat:

'Wearing' the red hat, you look at problems using intuition, gut reaction, and emotion. Also try to think how other people will react emotionally. Try to understand the responses of people who do not fully know your reasoning.

Black Hat:

Using black hat thinking, look at all the bad points of the decision. Look at it cautiously and defensively. Try to see why it might not work. This is important because it highlights the weak points in a plan. It allows you to eliminate them, alter them, or prepare contingency plans to counter them. Black Hat thinking helps to make your plans 'tougher' and more resilient. It can also help you to spot fatal flaws and risks before you embark on a course of action. Black Hat thinking is one of the real benefits of this technique, as many successful people get so used to thinking positively that often they cannot see problems in advance. This leaves them under-prepared for difficulties.

Yellow Hat:

The yellow hat helps you to think positively. It is the optimistic viewpoint that helps you to see all the benefits of the decision and the value in it. Yellow Hat thinking helps you to keep going when everything looks gloomy and difficult.

Green Hat:

The Green Hat stands for creativity. This 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.

Blue Hat:

The Blue Hat stands for process control. This is the hat worn by people chairing meetings. When running into difficulties because ideas are running dry, they may direct activity into Green Hat thinking. When contingency plans are needed, they will ask for Black Hat thinking, etc.

Key Points

Six Thinking Hats is a good technique for looking at the effects of a decision from a number of different points of view.

It allows necessary emotion and scepticism to be brought into what would otherwise be purely rational decisions. It opens up the opportunity for creativity within decision making.

Plans developed using the '6 Thinking Hats' technique will be sounder and more resilient than would otherwise be the case. It may also help you to avoid public relations mistakes, and spot good reasons not to follow a course of action before you have committed to it.