

Edward De Bono's Six Thinking Hats

MEETING ENGAGEMENT TOOL



Description

This process employs parallel thinking that enables the generation and analysis of options. This is a lead-in activity to decision-making.

Participants

This tool can be used with large groups, but to increase the likelihood of participation, we recommend limiting the group size to eight. It can also be used by an individual to analyze options.

Process

- Begin by teaching the group what kind of thinking each hat represents (use this [handout](#)). Have an example ready to use—keep it simple and fun.
- In one sentence, clearly describe the idea or option the team will be analyzing.
- Instruct the group to put on the same hat (typically start with white hat), and ask, “What would a person wearing a white/red/yellow hat say about this option?”
- Have someone record comments under the hat color label.
- There is no prescribed order; different situations may call for different approaches. The following order is typically used: white, red, yellow, black, green (facilitator wears blue throughout the process)
- Plan to initially spend up to 3 minutes per hat; expand the time if necessary.
- Make sure everyone keeps the same hat on. If someone makes a statement that represents a different color hat, remind them what hat they are supposed to be wearing. Don't make a note of their comment or write it on the “parking lot.” Encourage everyone to remain thinking in parallel.

Tips

- Not all of the hats have to be used every time. Try 10 minutes of green hat time to generate creative ideas, or if there isn't a lot of emotion around the issue and participants are already aware of the facts, just use yellow and black hats.
- Don't wear the red hat for too long, usually no more than 3 minutes, depending on size of

the group—just enough for people to vent their emotions.

- Remind the group that the black hat is not a bad hat. It represents smart, critical, cautionary thinking (imagine a judge's robe).
- Avoid labeling or categorizing people according to hat color. Individuals wear different hats at different times.
- It may be helpful to have a preformatted document ready to record ideas under each color hat.
- The hats are not just for groups; individuals can try using the six hats to assess an idea!

Benefits

- Parallel thinking focuses thinking and reduces drift and waffling.
- Discussions can be more productive.
- Reduces the probability that participants will get permanently stuck in one mode of thinking.
- The structure allows participants to easily track where the conversation is going.
- Facilitates less defensiveness and greater participation.
- Facilitates deeper thinking and creativity; thinkers only have to deal with one thing at a time.

Considerations

- Participants are not typically familiar with the six-hats process and need to learn it before they can use it.
- Facilitator needs to manage the tendency for labeling (e.g., "You are definitely a black hat person.")

Debrief Questions

After experiencing the process, ask

- How did this process help your team assess the issue or idea?
- What is clearer?
- What would have made this a better process?

Resources Needed

- Handout or slides to help teach the process (see below).
- Some means to record ideas generated under each hat—flip chart and markers.
- Colored hats are fun visual aids.

Resources

- Six Thinking Hats by Edward de Bono, Boston, Little, Brown, 1985, at debonogroup.com/six_thinking_hats.php.
- Six thinking hats [handout](#).