

Wearing Six Thinking Hats

By Olivier Serrat

Introduction

Routinely, many people think from analytical, critical, logical perspectives, and rarely view the world from emotional, intuitive, creative, or even purposely negative viewpoints. As a result, their arguments do not make leaps of imagination, they underestimate resistance to change, or they fail to draw contingency plans.

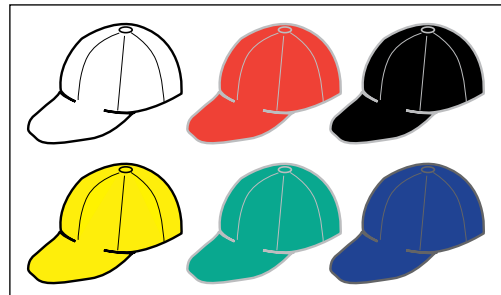
Lateral thinking¹ is reasoning that offers new ways of looking at problems—coming at them from the side rather than from the front—to foster change, creativity, and innovation. One tool of lateral thinking, the Six Thinking Hats technique, was devised by de Bono in 1985 to give groups a means to reflect together more effectively, one thing at a time.

Six Hats, Six Colors

The Six Thinking Hats technique involves the use of metaphorical hats in discussions.²

Participants put on hats in turn, possibly more than once but not necessarily all of them, to indicate directions (not descriptions) of thinking. The color of each is related to a function:

- White hat thinking—neutral, objective—focuses on the data and information that are available or needed.
- Red hat thinking—emotional—looks at a topic from the point of view of emotions, feelings, and hunches, without having to qualify or justify them.
- Black hat thinking—somber, serious—uses experience, logic, judgment, and caution to examine the difficulties and problems associated with a topic and the feasibility of ideas.
- Yellow hat thinking—sunny, positive—is concerned with benefits and values.

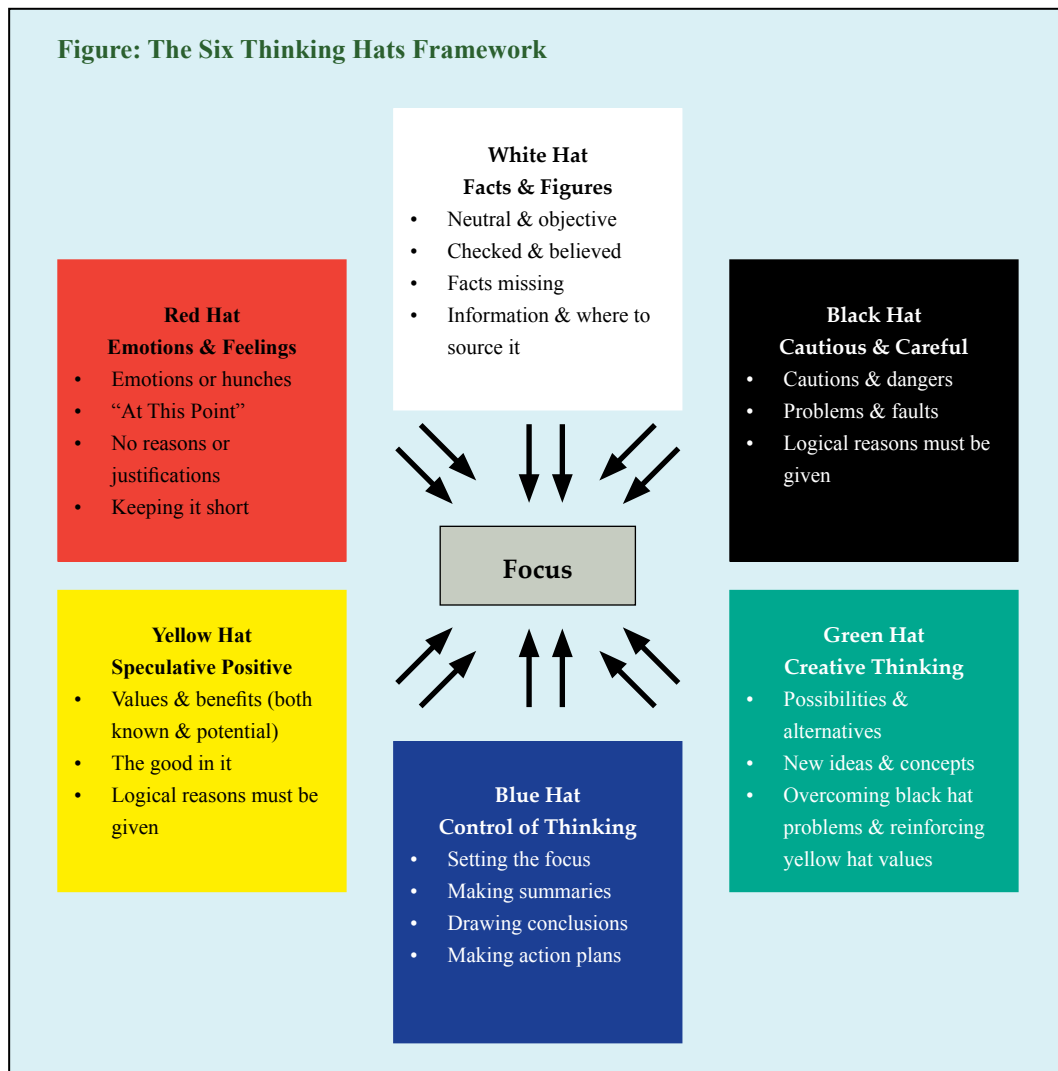


The difference between poor and effective teams lies not so much in their collective mental equipment but in how well they use their abilities to think together. The Six Thinking Hats technique helps actualize the thinking potential of teams.

¹ The term was coined by Edward de Bono in 1967.

² The larger benefits lie in conversations. But the technique can be also used by an individual.

- Green hat thinking—growth, fertility—intimates creative thinking and movement, not judgment, to generate new ideas and solutions.
- Blue hat thinking—cool, the sky above—concentrates on reflection, metacognition (thinking about the thinking required), and the need to manage the thinking process.³



Applications

Pertinent applications for the Six Thinking Hats technique include team productivity and communication; product and process improvement, as well as project management; critical and analytical thinking, problem solving, and decision making; and creativity training, meeting facilitation, and meeting management.

³ A blue hat should always be used both at the beginning and at the end of a discussion. What follows it depends on the nature of the topic and emotions about it. For instance, wearing a red hat next might defuse strong feelings. Discussions to brainstorm problems might adopt blue, white, green, red, yellow, black, green, and blue hats in sequence. Conversations seeking feedback might follow a blue, black, green, and blue hat pattern.

Benefits

The Six Thinking Hats technique provides a common language that works in different cultures. It promotes collaborative thinking, sharpens focus, facilitates communication, reduces conflict, enables thorough evaluations, improves exploration, fosters creativity and innovation, saves time, and boosts productivity.

Discipline

Discipline is important. The facilitator's role is to define the focus of the thinking, plan the sequence and timing of the thinking, ask for changes in the thinking if needed, handle requests from participants for changes in the thinking, and form periodic or final summaries of the thinking for consideration by participants. Each participant must follow the lead of the facilitator, stick to the hat being used, try to work within time limits, and contribute honestly and fully under each hat.

Further Reading

ADB. 2008. *The Reframing Matrix*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-solutions/the-reframing-matrix.pdf

———. 2009a. *The Five Whys Technique*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-solutions/the-five-whys-technique.pdf

———. 2009b. *The SCAMPER Technique*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-solutions/the-scamper-technique.pdf

———. 2009c. *Drawing Mind Maps*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-solutions/drawing-mind-maps.pdf

Edward De Bono. 1999. *Six Thinking Hats*. Back Bay Books.

For further information

Contact Olivier Serrat, Head of the Knowledge Management Center, Regional and Sustainable Development Department, Asian Development Bank (oserrat@adb.org).

.....

Asian Development Bank

ADB's vision is an Asia and Pacific region free of poverty. Its mission is to help its developing member countries substantially reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of their people. Despite the region's many successes, it remains home to two thirds of the world's poor: 1.8 billion people who live on less than \$2 a day, with 903 million struggling on less than \$1.25 a day. ADB is committed to reducing poverty through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration.

Based in Manila, ADB is owned by 67 members, including 48 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.

.....

Knowledge Solutions are handy, quick reference guides to tools, methods, and approaches that propel development forward and enhance its effects. They are offered as resources to ADB staff. They may also appeal to the development community and people having interest in knowledge and learning.

.....

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) or its Board of Governors or the governments they represent. ADB encourages printing or copying information exclusively for personal and noncommercial use with proper acknowledgment of ADB. Users are restricted from reselling, redistributing, or creating derivative works for commercial purposes without the express, written consent of ADB.

Asian Development Bank
6 ADB Avenue, Mandaluyong City
1550 Metro Manila, Philippines
Tel +63 2 632 4444
Fax +63 2 636 2444
knowledge@adb.org
www.adb.org/knowledgesolutions