

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 15, 1988

SIX THINKING HATS: AN EXERCISE TO COMBAT CONFUSION AND DEVELOP THINKING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

Edward deBono, creativity expert, has written a book targeted at the business management community. In Six Thinking Hats, (1985), deBono claims that the main difficulty we have with thinking is that we get confused. When we try to think, too much Crowds in on us at once--emotions, information, logic, hope, creativity, doubt. He offers a (not so simple) solution: Teach people to do one kind of thinking at a time.

To teach managers to think in one style at a time, deBono introduces the gimmick of six different colored thinking hats, each representing a different thinking style. These visual referents help managers isolate and practice the different thinking styles.

The purpose of this exercise is to introduce the six thinking styles to students in an experiential format. The exercise is appropriate for those management, organizational behavior and marketing classes in which creativity, problem solving, planning or decision making are addressed. An important feature of the design is that it can be presented by a group of six students as a class project.

INTRODUCTION

Details of Class Organization

The exercise is appropriate for classes of any size and can be adapted to various physical settings. At a fast pace, the design may be completed in a fifty minute class period, but a seventy five minute class period is preferable.

Preparation Details

(1) A handout "Six Thinking Hats" (Appendix 1) should be ready for distribution to all participants. (2) Six 5x7 note cards should be prepared, each containing a list of five examples of one of the thinking styles (Appendix 2). (3) Have on hand six hats (white, red, black, yellow, green and blue) to mark the occasion with festivity. Alternatively, flags or banners could be used. (I purchased ski caps for .99 each.)

Experience with the Design

The design has been used in several undergraduate classes and with a group of 150 managers. The basic information and practice opportunities have been offered in a variety of formats: (1) speaker to audience of managers, with volunteers from the audience sitting on barstools wearing the colorful ski caps, (2) in the classroom, with student volunteers wearing the hats, and (3) as a six member group presentation in a large class.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE BASIC DESIGN

1. Explain that the class session is to be devoted entirely to learning how to think and briefly introduce the book Six Thinking Hats.
2. Pull six brightly colored hats out of a bag or box, and

ask for six volunteers to wear the hats.

Give each volunteer a hat and a notecard on which examples of the corresponding thinking style are written. Locate the students where they are most visible to their classmates.

3. Very briefly overview each thinking style, as the student volunteers don and remove the appropriate thinking hats.

4. Distribute the handout Six Thinking Hats to class members.

5. Describe in detail each thinking hat/thinking style in the following manner:

(a) Ask one student volunteer to put on the appropriately colored hat

(b) The instructor defines and describes the thinking style

(c) Ask the student wearing the hat to read examples of the thinking style

(d) Invite class members to suggest further examples of the thinking style.

6. Challenge the students to use the handout as a tool the next time they need to think through a problem or an issue, beginning with blue hat thinking to manage thinking systematically in each of the styles.

VARIATION I

1. After presenting the basic design above, introduce a case or problem relevant to the course content.

2. Break the class into six groups and assign each group a different color thinking hat. Allow ten minutes for the groups to think through the problem in their thinking style only.

3. Assemble new groups made up of persons from each of the six thinking style groups. Allow the new groups 15 to 20 minutes for full discussion of the problem or case. Alternatively, have each group report out their thinking to the class at large.

4. Ask students to volunteer their personal learnings from this exercise.

VARIATION 2

In this variation, a six-member group prepares and presents the design to the class as a semester project. Each member becomes a specialist in a particular thinking style. It is most convenient to stage this presentation in a large room with moveable furniture.

1. Introduce deBono's idea of the six colored thinking hats. As each is introduced, the presenter-experts don their hats. The group might

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also enjoy wearing shirts or sweaters to match their hats.

2. Briefly overview each thinking style in a sentence or two.
3. Divide the entire class into six groups in any way that is convenient and ask each group to locate themselves with one of the student-presenters. The presenters should immediately move to six pre-determined locations in the room so the six groups can follow them.
4. When assembled in small groups, each presenter completes the following in ten minutes:
 - (a) Defines and describes the thinking style
 - (b) Gives examples of thinking in that style
 - (c) Asks the group members to generate further examples of thinking in that style.
5. At the end of each ten minute period, each small group rotates clockwise to a new presenter. Presenters repeat step 5 four more rounds.
6. Then the blue hat presenter introduces a problem or case, as in Variation 1, allowing the groups 15 minutes for discussion. The presenters in each of the small groups should take the Lead as “blue hat” thinkers and guide the groups through the other five thinking styles.
7. To conclude, the presenters should provide brief testimonials as to the usefulness of thinking systematically in the different styles. Citing specific instances from their own experience should be very helpful to the other students.

REFERENCES

deBono, Edward, (1985). Six Thinking Hats. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

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APPENDIX 1

SIX THINKING HATS

TYPE OF THINKING	WHAT IT IS LIKE	WHAT IT IS NOT
WHITE HAT (facts and figures)	neutral objective rational computer-like	arguing interpreting extrapolating opinion giving justifying persuading
RED HAT (emotions and feelings)	(1) emotions, feelings gut-reactions (2) hunches, intuitions, tastes, aesthetic preferences	justifying explaining accounting for logical consistent
BLACK HAT (logical-negative)	negative assessment why it won't work "yes, but" objecting criticisms what's wrong, in error risks and dangers tests for white hat thinking	emotional argumentative subjective
YELLOW HAT (speculative-positive)	positive assessment constructive optimistic focus on benefits, values emphasize practical includes dreams, visions, probing, exploring, finding logical support generative makes things happen	emotional intuitive pollyanna
GREEN HAT (creative and lateral)	creative fertile, growthful generating alternatives changing getting new ideas approaching old problems new ways being absurd, humorous provoking thinking	logical judgmental negative
BLUE HAT (control of thinking)	managing thinking planning and organizing monitoring and controlling giving all hats their turn formally structuring thinking	persuading advocating criticizing

A summary from Six Thinking Hats by Edward deBono (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1985).

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APPENDIX 2

EXAMPLE OF THINKING STYLES

WHITE HAT THINKING

- *Last year there was a 25% increase in turkey sales in the U.S.
- *Student enrollments are higher fall semester than spring semester.
- *He left his apartment at 6:30 and arrived at school at 8:00.
- *50% of the students in the college are women.
- *This class period is scheduled to last 50 minutes.

RED HAT THINKING

- *I feel really good about this plan.
- *I am opposed to the merger because I think you are working for your best interest and have no concern for the stockholders.
- *Of the two options, I prefer the first. We should continue the strike. It does not feel right to negotiate this one.
- *I am angry because I think you are discounting my ideas before considering them.
- *I have to admit, I am not happy in this job.

BLACK HAT THINKING

- *In the past, lowering prices has not increased sales enough to offset the reduction in profit margin. So, it won't work.
- *your figures are not to be trusted. They are four years out of date, the sample was small and the figures only come from the south of the country.
- *It is true that divorces and washing machine sales are both on the rise. However, this does not mean that washing machine sales are causing divorces or vice versa. Both trends may be due to rising affluence.
- *The figures showing a fall in crime in the U.S. should be related to population figures for age groups. The fall in crime might be due to baby boomers now reaching middle age.
- *If you give them a bonus, they will very soon expect this as part of their regular wages.

YELLOW HAT THINKING

- *Failing that course was the best thing that could have happened to me. I hated that major.
- *There's a remote chance someone survived that plane crash. We must go and look.
- *It is possible that the new party will split the opposition vote.
- *Although you are not likely to find a hidden art treasure in a small town antique shop, who knows? Many art treasures are found in unlikely places.
- *[f we invest in this promotion, sales may go way up.

GREEN HAT THINKING

- *Let's offer prisoners a pension for a year after their discharge. Give them every benefit in starting over.
- *Executives could wear pink shirts next Tuesday to announce that they want promotions.
- *A polluting factory should be located downstream of itself.
- *Can we lower the price and raise the price at the same time--create an economy Line and a premium Line?
- *Let's design a car with self-rotating tires.

BLUE HAT THINKING

- *We ought to be looking at alternatives at this point.
- *We're not getting anywhere. I suggest we do some red hat thinking to clear the air.
- *We want to anticipate what our competitors will do when we lower our prices.
- *What outcomes do we hope for as a result of this meeting?
- *I want some exploratory thinking on TV shopping shows.