



Developing Understanding of the Six Hats: *For Role Plays as Discovery Learning and Drill-and-Practice Exercises*¹

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Edward de Bono calls it *parallel thinking*. In simplest terms it is the development of one's *thinking ability* (including but not limited to reasoning ability) through increasing the consciousness of six key postural and directional habits.

To give this parallel thinking a fair try, one needs a basic grasp of the six postures (the *six hats*) and the development of competence of knowingly moving back and forth among them in order to enter into a more flexible, creative, and comprehensive form of human dialogue. Consider: it is not unusual for people to get into a rut and persist in seeing things from a “favorite” and habitual viewpoint and socio-emotional bias. Thus group process and decision-making become tedious exercises in the grand game of *bogging down*; stalemate is the predictable outcome.

As in most of de Bono's work, the basic premises of the *six hats* seem little more than common sense. Many adults need only a brief orientation to the different hats (directional postures) followed by a progressively scaled-up series of application exercises. This paper provides both and is intended to supplement and provide lively experience in and around de Bono's ideas but in no way to replace his book, *Six Thinking Hats*.

Basics of the “Six Hat” Procedure

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to quick and effective thinking is the ego. People tend to use thinking to parade their egos. Thinking is used to attack and put down other people. Thinking is used to get your own way. Thinking is used to show others how clever you are. Thinking is used to express personal antagonisms. (Bono, p. 10)

Confrontational and adversarial thinking exacerbate the ego problem. Six Hats thinking removes it. With the Six Hats method you exert your ego by performing well as a thinker under each of the hats. (Bono, p. 11)

It is possible to create tests to determine whether a person is type A or type B, or any similar descriptive discriminations. Psychologists do that all the time. The difficulty is that once people have been put into ‘boxes’ they tend to stay there. (Bono, p. 6)

Confusion is the biggest enemy of good thinking. We try to do too many things at the same time. We look for information. We are affected by feelings. We seek new ideas and options. We

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have to be cautious. We want to find benefits. Those are a lot of things that need doing.
(Bono, p. 11)

The six hats represent the mental directions (postures or orientations) that one can take in a thinking process. De Bono uses the image of the hat to represent the way we can put one or another of these postures on ourselves and even move from one to another during a thinking experience. The colors assigned to the six are a clue to the emphasis of each and the contrasts among them.

I want thinkers to visualize and to imagine the hats as actual hats. For this to happen color is important. How could you distinguish between the hats? Different shapes would . . . be difficult to learn and would be confusing. Color makes the imaging easier. (p. 13)

Describing the Six Hats According to Colors

White Hat. *White is neutral and objective. The white hat is concerned with objective facts and figures.*

Red Hat. *Red suggests anger (seeing red), rage and emotions. The red hat gives the emotional view.*

Black Hat. *Black is somber and serious. The black hat is cautious and careful. It points out the weaknesses in an idea.*

Yellow Hat. *Yellow is sunny and positive. The yellow hat is optimistic and covers hope and positive thinking.*

Green Hat. *Green is grass, vegetation, and abundant, fertile growth. The green hat indicates creativity and new ideas.*

Blue Hat. *Blue is cool, and it is also the color of the sky, which is above everything else. The blue hat is concerned with control, the organization of the thinking process, and the use of other hats. (pp. 13,14)*

As you go further with the application of this process, you will benefit from de Bono's exposition of the six hats, each given four to eight short chapters in his book. But for now, use your imagination and creativity as you try these exercises.

Exercise One: Listening for Clues

1. The facilitator will designate a selected current event or recent historic happening and review, in a neutral style, the major elements that have been reported in the media.
2. Each member of the group is to comment or raise questions about this event. Whenever possible make your comments in response or reaction to the comments of someone who has spoken before you.
3. From time to time the facilitator will call for a pause (by calling "Cut!") then asking two key questions in various ways:
 - a) What are the purposes of the comments that are being made?
 - b) Can each comment be classified in terms of the thinking from under a **colored hat**?

Exercise Two: Hat Matching

The purpose of this exercise is to sustain a series of comments that each use any one **Thinking Hat**.

The facilitator will briefly describe the issue or problem to be discussed. The selected topic will represent a commonly debated or discussed issue in the institutional environment—a known problem or issue or general concern in school, hospital, church, or whatever.

The facilitator will assign a beginning **Thinking Hat** to speak under. All discussants should carefully represent the direction of thought represented by the assigned **Hat**. Everyone speaks under the same **Hat** if at all possible.

When the facilitator determines that the discussion is beginning to be inconsistent or that it has gone on long enough to stimulate a strong debriefing session, the facilitator will call “Cut!” and ask the following questions:

1. What were some of the strongest and clearest examples of the assigned **Thinking Hat**?
2. What are the strengths of the centering of thinking on this **Thinking Hat**?
3. What are the weaknesses or inadequacies that result from centering on this **Hat**?

Suggestion: **Exercise 2: Hat Matching** can be repeated several times assigning different **Thinking Hats**. Pausing in mid-exercise to assign a different **Thinking Hat** to the whole group can also be useful.

Exercise Three: Discussion—Using Various Thinking Hats

Select a demonstration set of four or five people from the learning group. This set of learners will play the roles of an informal group that is talking about a problem that needs to be solved. The unassigned learners will be observers, carrying a special responsibility to identify uses of any or all of the **Six Thinking Hats**.

The facilitator will read one of the following descriptions, or an appropriate alternative of comparable local importance:

1. The campus lacks adequate facilities for the appropriate social support of an effective learning community. What have you observed about this? What could be done?
2. It is becoming a common complaint that there are feelings of hostility between two ethnic groups in this community. This allegation may or may not be true; why do you think that it is being talked about? Do you think that there is an actual problem? What should be done?
3. Some say that gender prejudice may be an issue in this institution. Do you think it is discussed too much? Not enough? What lies behind the complaints? What could be done?

The debriefing of these discussions should begin after the facilitator determines that at least **four** of the **Thinking Hats** have been represented in the discussion. The questions to guide the debriefing:

1. What **Thinking Hats** have we noticed? What comments were the clues?
2. What **Thinking Hats** were less represented? What could they have contributed to the quality and substance of our thinking?