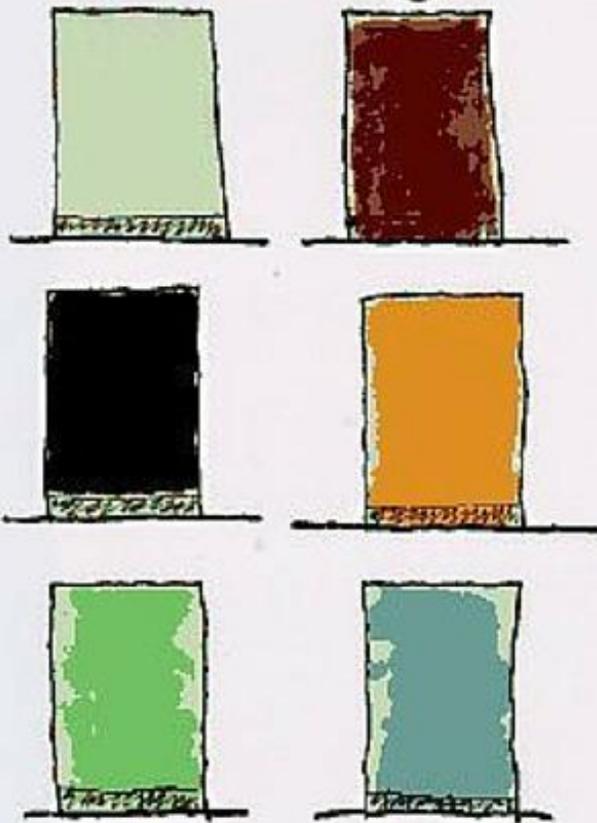


# EDWARD DE BONO Six Thinking Hats



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An essential approach to business  
management from the creator of  
*Lateral Thinking*

## SIX THINKING HATS – THE IDEA IN BRIEF

*"Thinking is the ultimate human resource. Yet we can never be satisfied with our most important skill. No matter how good we become, we should always want to be better."*

*~ Edward de Bono*

When we think in the normal way, we try to do too much at once. We may be looking at the information, forming ideas, and judging someone else's ideas all at the same time. The Six Hats method allows us to unbundle thinking and instead of trying to do everything at once, we can separate out the different aspects of thinking and pay full attention to each aspect in turn.

*"Six Thinking Hats" is a powerful technique that helps you look at important decisions from a number of different perspectives. It pushes you to move outside your routine ways of thinking; as such, it helps you understand the full complexity of a decision, and spot issues and opportunities which you might otherwise not notice.*

Many people are successful because they think from a very rational, positive viewpoint. The problem with this is that, they may fail to look at problems from emotional, intuitive, creative or negative viewpoints. This can mean that they underestimate resistance to change, don't make creative leaps, and fail to make essential contingency plans. Similarly, pessimists may be excessively defensive, and people used to a very logical approach to problem solving may fail to engage their creativity or listen to their intuition.

**If you look at a problem using the Six Thinking Hats technique, then you'll use all of these approaches to develop your best solution. Your decisions and plans will mix ambition, skill in execution, sensitivity, creativity and good contingency planning.**

## SIX THINKING HATS – THE IDEA IN PRACTICE

**The White Hat  
calls for  
information  
known or  
needed**

Facts  
Details  
Information  
Research

What do you know about...?  
What are the facts about...?  
What do you need/want to know...?  
Where might you go to find out about...?

**The Red Hat  
when emotions  
are placed  
without  
explanation**

Feelings  
Emotions  
Intuition  
Hunches

What are your feelings about...?  
What is your intuition about...?  
What is your gut feeling about...?  
What are your prejudices about...?

**The Black Hat  
signifies caution  
and critical  
thinking – why  
something  
might not work**

Caution  
Consequences  
Risks  
Weaknesses

What should you be cautious about...?  
What was the negative outcome of...?  
What are the difficulties you see...?  
Why won't/didn't this work out...?

**The Yellow Hat  
symbolizes  
optimism –  
explore the  
positives, probe  
for benefits**

Positive  
Benefits  
Value  
Strengths

What is good about...?  
What are the benefits of...?  
What do you like about...?  
What will you gain...?

**The Green Hat  
is an  
opportunity to  
express new  
concepts and  
perceptions**

Creativity  
Imagination  
Ideas  
Possibilities

What if...?  
What are the other ways of doing this...?  
What other possibilities exist...?  
What new ideas can you think of...?

**The Blue Hat  
manages the  
thinking  
process –  
ensures that the  
Six Thinking  
Hats guidelines  
are observed**

Thinking  
Organizing  
Summarizing  
Concluding

What is your action plan...?  
What are you planning to do next...?  
How did you get to this answer...?  
What was the order of the events...?

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional Thinking has always been more concerned with 'what is' which is determined by analysis, judgment and argument. This is a fine and useful system. But there is another whole aspect of thinking that is concerned with 'what can be', which involves constructive thinking, creative thinking and 'designing a way forward' – parallel thinking.

## PARALLEL THINKING

Parallel thinking is the exact opposite of argument, adversarial and confrontational thinking, where each party deliberately takes an opposite view. Parallel thinking means that at any moment everyone is looking in the same direction.

In traditional thinking, if two people disagree, there is an argument in which each tries to prove the other party wrong. In parallel thinking, both views, no matter how contradictory, are put down in parallel. If later on, it is essential to choose between the different positions, then an attempt is made at that point. If a choice cannot be made, then the design has to cover both possibilities. At all times, the emphasis is on designing a way forward.

In today's changing world, instead of judging our way forward, we need to design our way forward. We need to be thinking about "what can be," not just about "what is". That is why parallel thinking is so critical.

The essence of parallel thinking is that at any moment everyone is looking in the same direction – but the direction can be changed. So what are the directions in which thinkers can be invited to look? This is where the hats come in.

There are six coloured hats corresponding to the six direction of thinking: white, red, black, yellow, green and blue.

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## NOT CATEGORIES OF PEOPLE

There is a huge temptation to use the hats to describe and label people, such as 'she is a black hat' or 'he is a green hat person'. The hats are not descriptions of people but modes of behavior. It is true that some people

might always be bubbling with ideas or some might be better at focusing at facts or yet others may be permanently cautious and inclined to look out for risks. Nevertheless, the hats are not categories of people.

The hats are directions of thinking. Every person must be able, and skilled, to look in all directions. For those reasons, the use of hats as labels is dangerous because it destroys the whole point of the system, which is that everyone can look in every direction.

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## RESULTS

Over the years, the results of using the Six Hats method have become increasingly clear and can be summarized in four broad categories.

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## POWER

The whole point of parallel thinking is that the experience and intelligence of everyone should be used in each direction. So everyone present wears the black hat at the appointed time. Everyone present wears the white hat at another time. That is parallel thinking and makes fullest use of everyone's intelligence and experience. Thus, the collective mental ability of many people can be focused on a problem, helping them solve it more easily.

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## TIME SAVING

In normal thinking, if someone is saying something, the others have to respond – in agreement or disagreement or simply out of politeness. But with parallel thinking, every thinker at every moment is looking in the same direction; so, the thoughts are laid out in parallel. Normally, if two points of view are at odds, they are argued out. But with parallel thinking, both views are laid out alongside each other and later on, if essential, a decision between the two is made. Hence, there is no argument at every step and the subject is fully explored quickly.

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## REMOVAL OF EGO

Confrontational and adversarial thinking exacerbate the ego problem. Six Hats thinking removes it. With Six Hats method you exert your ego by performing well as a thinker under each of the hats. The Six Hats method provides neutral and objective exploration of a subject – argument does not.

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## ONE THING AT A TIME

Confusion is the biggest enemy of clear thinking. Ordinarily, we try to do too many things at the same time – looking for information, dealing with feelings, seeking new ideas, looking at risks, seeking benefits, etc. Just as tossing one ball is easier than juggling six; thinking in one direction at a time makes it easier to solve problems.

People do not choose argument because it is the preferred method. They simply do not know any other way. The Six Hats provides another way.

## SIX HATS, SIX COLORS

Each of the six thinking hats has a colour and the colour provides the name for the hat. **The hats were named after the colours because it not only made them easier to recall but also help thinkers to visualize and imagine the hats as actual hats.** The color of each hat is also related to its function.

**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 is concerned with control, the organization of the thinking process, and the use of the other hats.

Thus, if you remember the colour and associations of each hat, remembering the function of the hat will then follow.

**In practice, hats are always referred to by their colour and never by their function.** You can ask someone to 'take off the black hat for a moment' more easily than you can ask that person to stop being cautious. Because the term 'black hat' is neutral. **The neutrality of the colour allows the hats to be used without embarrassment.**

Also, when you are dealing with people who have not read this book and who are unaware of the symbolism of the six thinking hats, the explanation attached to each colour can quickly give the flavor of each hat.

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#### USING THE HATS

The hats can be used as symbols to request a particular type of thinking. Hence, you can use any one type of hat in a standalone format. Alternately, the hats can be used one after the other in a certain sequence. This sequence may be pre-set or may be allowed to evolve with the flow of the meeting. In a sequence, any hat can be used as often as you like. There is no need to use every hat and the sequence may be made up of two or more hats. When using the hats, the following points need to be kept in mind.

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#### DISCIPLINE

Discipline is very important. Members of the group must stay with the hat that is indicated at that moment. Only the group leader, chairperson or facilitator can indicate a change of hat.

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#### TIMING

You must define the time to be allowed under each hat. This forces people to concentrate on what they are trying to do and reduces aimless drifting. It is better to set a short time and extend it if required than to set a long time and have people sitting around wondering what to say.

## GUIDELINES

While there is no right sequence to follow and you may choose any sequence that makes sense to you, **a blue hat should always be used both at the beginning and at the end of the session – like two bookends.**

*The first blue hat indicates:*

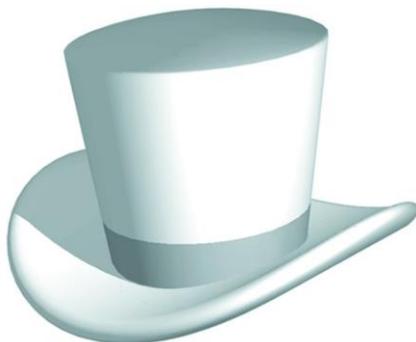
- Why we are here
- What we are thinking about
- The definition of the situation (or problem), alternative definitions
- What we want to achieve, where we want to end up
- The background to the thinking, and a plan for the sequence of hats to be used

*The final blue hat indicates:*

- What we have achieved
- Outcome
- Conclusion
- Design, solution, and next steps.

**What follows the first blue hat depends on the nature of the thinking.**

## THE WHITE HAT



**Think Paper!** Think Fax machine, photocopier, books, print outs. The white hat is about information. **When the white hat is in use, everyone focuses directly and exclusively on information.**

Imagine a computer that gives the facts and figures for which it is asked. The computer is neutral and objective. It does not offer interpretations or opinions. When wearing the white thinking hat, the thinker should imitate the computer.

The person requesting the information should use focusing questions in order to obtain the information or to fill in the information gaps. In practice, there is a two-tier system of information. The first tier contains checked

and proven facts – first-class facts. The second tier contains facts that are believed to be true but have not yet been fully checked – second-class facts.

There is a spectrum of likelihood ranging from ‘always true’ to ‘never true’. In between there are usable levels such as ‘by and large’, ‘often’, ‘sometimes’ and ‘occasionally’. Information of this sort can be put out under the white hat, provided the appropriate frame is used to indicate likelihood.

**White hat thinking is a discipline and a direction.** The thinker strives to be more neutral and more objective in the presentation of information. You can be asked to put on the white thinking hat or you can ask someone to put it on. You can yourself choose when to put it on or take it off.

**The white (absence of colour) indicates neutrality.**

## The White Hat

The White Hat covers facts, figures, data and information.

Wearing your white hat allows you to present information in a neutral and objective way.

Questions you might ask while wearing your white hat include:

What information do we have here? What information is missing?

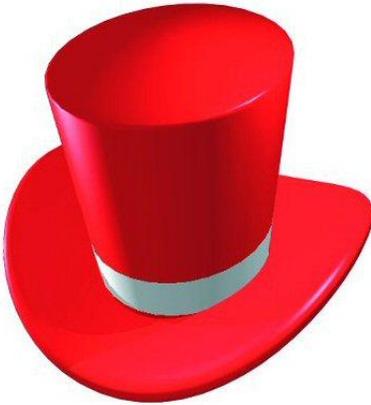
What information would we like to have?

How are we going to get the information we need?

When you wear the white hat, you focus directly on information – what is available, what is needed and how it might be obtained.

**Proposals, opinions, beliefs and arguments should be put aside.**

## THE RED HAT



**Think of fire. Think of warmth.** Think of feelings. Using the red hat gives you an opportunity to express feelings, emotions and intuition without any need to explain or justify them.

Emotions and feelings play a huge role in our lives and therefore need their own space. In a normal business discussion you are not supposed to allow your emotions to come in. They come in anyway – you merely disguise them as logic. The red hat provides a unique and special opportunity for feelings, emotions and intuition to be put forward as such.

### **Red hat thinking encourages the search: ‘Just what are the emotions involved here?’**

Wearing the red hat allows the thinker to say ‘this is how I feel about the matter.’ The red hat legitimizes emotions and feelings as an important part of thinking. The red hat makes feelings visible so that they can become part of the thinking map and also part of the value system that chooses the route on the map.

The red hat provides a convenient method for a thinker to switch in and out of the feeling mode in a way that is not possible without such a device. **The red hat allows a thinker to explore the feelings of others by asking for a red hat view.**

The most difficult thing about wearing the red thinking hat is resisting the temptation to justify an expressed emotion. Such justification may be true or it may be false. In both cases red hat thinking makes it unnecessary. “...Never mind why you mistrust him. You mistrust him.”

We are brought up to apologize for emotions and feelings because they are not the stuff of logical thinking. That is why we tend to treat them as an extension of logic. If we dislike someone, there must be a good reason for this. If we like a project, this must be based on logic. Red hat thinking frees us from such obligations.

The red hat covers two broad types of feeling. First, there are the ordinary emotions such as fear and dislike to the more subtle ones like suspicion. Second, there are the complex judgments that go into such types of feeling as hunch, intuition, sense, taste, aesthetic feeling and other not visibly justified types of feeling. Where an opinion has a large measure of this type of feeling, it can also fit under the red hat.

**Revisit your feelings after you have gone through the other hats. You may be surprised how your feelings have changed. If your feelings have changed, it is good. It means that the method is working.**

## The Red Hat

The Red Hat covers intuition, feelings, hunches and emotions.

Wearing your red hat allows you to put forward your feelings and intuition without the need for justification, explanation or apology.

Putting on the red hat allows you to express what you feel. Examples:

- My gut feeling is that this will not work.
- I don't like the way this is being done.
  - This proposal is terrible.
- My intuition tells me that prices are going to fall further

**The red hat allows feelings to come into the discussion without pretending to be anything else. It is always valuable to get feelings out into the open.**

## THE BLACK HAT



The black hat is the hat of survival. The black hat is the most used of all the hats. It is perhaps the most important hat. The black hat is the hat of caution. The black hat is for being careful. The black hat stops us from doing things that are illegal, dangerous, unprofitable, polluting, and so on.

Black hat thinking is concerned with caution. At some stage, we need to consider risks, dangers, obstacles, potential problems and the downside of a suggestion. It would be extremely foolish to proceed with any suggestion unless full consideration has been given to the caution aspect, to matters that need our attention.

Thus, the most important function of the black hat is risk assessment:

- What will happen if we take this action?
- Will it be acceptable?
- Do we have the resources to do it? How will people react?
- How will competitors react? What can go wrong?
- What are the potential problems? Will it continue to be profitable?

The black hat is the 'natural hat' of traditional thinking. It is based on the 'natural mismatch' mechanism. The brain forms patterns of expectation: this is what the world is like. If we come across something that does not match these existing patterns, then we feel very uncomfortable. This natural mechanism ensures that we do not make mistakes. Thus, with the black hat we point out what us wrong, what does not fit, and what will not work. It protects us from wasting money and energy.

The black hat is very much about 'fit'. Under the black hat we focus directly on the caution aspects. This is the basis of survival, of success and of civilization.

Black hat thinking is always logical. There must be a logical basis for the criticism. If a comment is emotional, then it comes under the red hat, not the black hat.

Black hat thinking may point out procedural errors in the thinking itself. But black hat thinking is not argument and must not be allowed to degenerate into argument. The purpose of black hat thinking is to put caution points on the map. Black hat thinking can be abused and overused if it is the only mode of thinking. However, this abuse in no way diminishes the value of the black hat.

## The Black Hat

The Black Hat covers judgment, caution and evaluation.

Wearing your black hat allows you to put consider your proposals critically and logically.

Wearing the black hat you might consider the following:

- Costs (This proposal would be too expensive)
- Regulations (I don't think the current regulations allow this)
  - Design (This design looks good but it is not practical)
  - Safety (Are you sure that these harnesses would work?)

**The black hat is very valuable because it helps in reducing errors. However if used too early in a problem solving process, it can kill creative ideas with the negativity.**

## THE YELLOW HAT



Think of sunshine. Think of optimism. Under the yellow hat a thinker deliberately sets out to find whatever benefit there may be in a suggestion. Under the yellow hat the thinker tries to see how it may be possible to put the idea into practice.

The yellow hat is a harder hat to wear than the black hat. There is a natural mechanism in the brain that helps us to avoid dangers. There is no such natural mechanism for the yellow hat. For this reason most people are much better using the black hat than the yellow hat.

The yellow hat has a high value because it forces people to spend time seeking out value.

Sometimes there are big surprises under the yellow hat. Something that did not seem very interesting suddenly has a high value. Even the most unattractive ideas can be found to have some value, if we look hard enough.

The yellow hat should be logically based. There should be some reason given for the value put forward. The yellow hat is a judgment hat and is not based on fantasy. What are the values? For whom? Under what circumstance? How are the values delivered? What other values are there?

Yellow hat thinking is positive and constructive. Yellow hat thinking is concerned with positive assessment just as black hat thinking is concerned with negative assessment. It covers a positive spectrum ranging from the logical and practical at one end to dreams, vision and hope at the other end.

Yellow hat thinking probes and explores for value and benefit. It then strives to find logical support for this value and benefit. It seeks to put forward soundly based optimism but is not restricted to this – provided other types of optimism are appropriately labeled as such.

Yellow hat thinking is constructive and generative. From yellow hat thinking come concrete proposals and suggestions. However, yellow hat thinking is neither concerned with mere positive euphoria (red hat) nor directly with creating new ideas (green hat). It is concerned with making things happen. Effectiveness is the aim of the yellow hat constructive thinking.

## The Yellow Hat

The Yellow Hat calls for optimism and looks at positive aspects.

Wearing your yellow hat allows you to look for benefits, feasibility and ways of doing things.

Wearing the yellow hat you might ask the following questions:

What are the benefits of this option? Why is this proposal preferable?

What are the positive assets of this design? How can we make this work?

**The yellow hat is a deliberate search for the positive. Every creative idea deserves some yellow hat attention.**

## THE GREEN HAT



The green hat is the energy hat. Think of vegetation. Think of growth. Think of new leaves and branches. The green hat is the creative hat.

The Green hat is for creative thinking. The person who puts on the green hat is going to use the idioms of creative thinking. Those around are required to treat the output as a creative output. Ideally, both the thinker and the listener must be wearing green hats. The green hat includes both 'the top of the head' creativity and 'deliberate' creativity.

The urge to do things in a better way should be the back ground to all our thinking.

Under the green hat we put forward new ideas. Under the green hat we lay out options and alternatives. These include both the obvious alternatives and fresh ones. Under the green hat we seek to modify and improve suggested ideas.

The value of the green hat is that a specific time is set out for everyone to make a creative effort. Creativity is no longer the business of the 'idea person' while everyone sits around waiting to pounce on an idea.

Under the green hat, you are permitted to put forward 'possibilities'. Possibilities play a much bigger role in thinking than most people believe. Without possibilities, you cannot make progress. It is under the green hat that suggested courses of action are out forward: 'We could do this, or this, or this.' The green hat is also used to overcome the difficulties put forward under the black hat.

In business training a great deal of emphasis is put on decision making. Yet the quality of any decision depends very much on the alternatives that are available to the decision maker. The search for alternatives is a fundamental aspect of green hat thinking. There is a need to go beyond the known and the obvious and the satisfactory. The green hat thinker uses the creative pause to consider, at any point, whether there might be alternative ideas.

In green hat thinking, the idiom of movement replaces that of judgment. The thinker seeks to move forward from an idea in order to reach a new idea.

## The Green Hat

The Green Hat calls for creativity and looking at new ways of doing things.

Wearing your green hat allows you to focus on creative thinking and helps you go against our habits of recognition, judgment and criticism.

Wearing the Green hat you might ask the following questions:

Are there any other ideas here?

**Are there any additional alternatives? Could we do this in a different way? Could there be another explanation?**

## THE BLUE HAT



Think of the blue sky above. Think of 'overview'. The blue hat is for thinking about thinking.

The blue hat is like the conductor of the orchestra. The conductor gets the best out of the orchestra by seeing that what should be done is done at the right time. The blue hat is like the ringmaster of a circus. The blue hat is for the management of thinking. The blue hat is the control hat. The blue hat thinker organizes the thinking itself. Blue hat thinking is thinking about the thinking needed to explore the subject. The blue hat is for process control.

Using the blue hat at the beginning of a thinking session defines the situation. The blue hat thinker defines the subjects towards which thinking is to be directed. It sets the focus. The blue hat may seek alternative definitions of a problem. The blue hat lays out the purpose of the thinking. The blue hat lays out what is to be achieved.

It is under the initial blue hat that the agenda or sequence of use of the other hats is laid out. During the session the blue hat keeps the discipline and ensures that people keep to the relevant hat. The blue hat also announces a change of hats.

Blue hat thinking monitors the thinking and ensures that the rules of the game are observed. It stops argument and insists on the map type of thinking. Blue hat thinking can also be used for the occasional interjections which request a hat. It can be used to set up a step-by-step sequence of thinking operations just as a dance follows the choreography.

Typically the blue hat is worn by the facilitator, chairperson or leader of the session. This is a permanent role. In addition during a specific blue hat session, anyone can make procedural suggestions.

At the end of a session, the blue hat asks for the outcome. This may be in the form of a summary, a conclusion, a decision, a solution and so on. The blue hat may even acknowledge that little progress has been made. Under the final blue hat, the next steps can be laid out. These might be action steps or further thinking on some points.

Even when the specific blue hat thinking role is assigned to one person, it is still open to anyone to offer blue hat comments and suggestions.

## The Blue Hat

The Blue Hat controls the sequence of thinking.

Wearing your blue hat allows you to have an overview of the proceedings so you can organize and control the thinking process to make it more creative.

Wearing the Blue hat you might:

**Look not at the subject itself but at the 'thinking' about the subject set the Agenda for thinking**

Suggest the next step in thinking

## CONCLUSION

The biggest enemy of thinking is complexity, for that leads to confusion. When thinking is clear and simple, it becomes more enjoyable and more effective. The Six Thinking Hats concept is very simple to understand. It is also very simple to use.

There are two main purposes to the Six Thinking Hats concept. The first purpose is to simplify thinking by allowing a thinker to deal with one thing at a time. Instead of having to take care of emotions, logic, information, hope and creativity all at the same time, the thinker is able to deal with them separately.

The second main purpose of the Six Thinking Hats concept is to allow a switch in thinking. If a person at a meeting has been persistently negative, that person can be asked to take off the black thinking hat. That is a direct request to be positive. In this way the six hats provide an idiom that is definite without being offensive.

Six Thinking Hats is a good technique for looking at the effects of a decision from a number of different points of view. Some of the benefits of using this technique are:

- Streamlines your thinking Creates Mental Energy
- Enables you to make quick decisions Gets real group participation
- Focuses on the issue, not the person

In practice, one of the most striking things about the use of the Six Hats method is that decisions seem to make themselves. When you come to the final blue hat, the decision is often obvious to everyone present. This seems hard to believe in theory but happens very often in practice.