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Name of Designated Person authorising scanning: Christine Shipman

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Chapter 2

Six Hats, Six Colours

Each of the six thinking hats has a colour: white, red, black, yellow, green, blue. The colour provides the name for the hat.

I could have chosen clever Greek names to indicate the type of thinking required by each hat. That would have been impressive and would have pleased some people. But it would be of little practical value since the names would be difficult to remember.

I want thinkers to *visualize* and to imagine the hats as actual hats. For this to happen colour is important. How else could you distinguish between the hats? Different shapes would again be difficult to learn and would be confusing. Colour makes the imaging easier.

The colour 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 sombre 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.

Chapter 3

Using the Hats

There are two basic ways to use the hats. The hats can be used singly to request a type of thinking. Or, the hats can be used in a sequence to explore a subject or solve a problem.

Single Use

In single use, the hats are used as symbols to request a particular type of thinking. In the course of a conversation or discussion, you may come to a point where there is a need to generate some fresh options:

... I think we need some green hat thinking here.

Later in the same meeting, another course of action is suggested:

... Maybe we should have some black hat on this.

This artificiality of the hats is their great strength. Without the hats, our requests for thinking are both feeble and personal:

... We need some creativity here.

... Don't be so negative.

When Ron Barbaro was head of Prudential Insurance, I watched him interact with his executives. He would suggest an idea. Those around him would point out that the agents might not like it, that it might be risky, that it may not be legal, and so on. He would listen carefully and then say: 'Yes. That's fine black hat thinking. Now let's try the yellow hat.'

In Japan it is bad manners to criticize anything the boss might say. The hats provide a neutral signal that allows for cautious comments.

... Mr Shinto, I would like to do some black hat thinking here.

The red hat provides a unique opportunity to tap into the feelings, emotions and intuition of individuals. People usually do not put forward their feelings and as a manager, it is difficult to ask for feelings. But the formality and neutrality of the red hat make it possible to ask an individual for his or her feelings on a matter.

The yellow hat provides an opportunity to get people to look for values. An idea may be immediately dismissed because at first sight it has few virtues and many disadvantages. But after some directed yellow hat thinking, an idea may prove to have many benefits.

... This idea does not seem promising at all. But let's have some yellow hat on it.

It is usually harder to find benefits than dangers. Under the yellow hat there can be some powerful insights. Some-

thing that did not seem promising can in fact have a high value that had not been spotted before.

The white hat provides a means for getting people to separate pure information from judgement. The formality of the white hat asks someone to stick directly to the information.

It is not necessary to specify a hat every time you open your mouth. The hats are there for you to use at your discretion as a formal means to ask for a certain type of thinking. Once people have been trained in the use of the hats, they know exactly how to respond. Instead of the general and vague request to 'think about this', there is now a precise way to ask for a particular mode of thinking.

Sequence Use

The hats can also be used one after the other in a certain sequence.

Any hat can be used as often as you like.

There is no need to use every hat.

The sequence may be made up of two, three, four or more hats.

There are two broad types of sequence: evolving and pre-set.

With the evolving sequence, you choose the first hat (or the facilitator does). When that hat is completed, the next hat is chosen, and so on. For two reasons, I would not recommend this method unless you are experienced in using the Six Hats method. The first reason is that the members of the group may spend so much time arguing about which hat should be used next that there will be little time for thinking about the subject itself. The second reason is that whoever

is choosing the sequence of the hats may be seen to be manipulating the meeting to get an outcome he or she desires. Before you are experienced in using the Six Hats method, it is better to stick to pre-set sequences.

A pre-set sequence is set up at the beginning of the meeting, under an initial blue hat. The sequence is laid out in advance and then followed. Minor variations are permitted, depending on output.

Discipline

Discipline is very important. Members of the group must stay with the hat that is indicated at that moment. A member of the group is not permitted to say: 'I want to put on my black hat here.' That would mean going back to the usual argument mode. Only the group leader, chairperson or facilitator can indicate a change of hat. The hats cannot be used to describe what you want to say. The hats indicate the direction in which to think. It is very important that this discipline be maintained. After using the method for a while, people find it much easier to stay with the specified hat.

Timing

How much time should be allowed under each hat? I prefer to set a short time. That forces people to concentrate on what they are trying to do and reduces aimless waffle. I would normally allow one minute per person present. So if there are four people in the meeting, then four minutes would be allowed under each hat. If genuine ideas are still being put forward after that time, I would extend the time. So if under the black hat 'concern' points were being raised, there is no

need to say: 'Sorry, time's up.' You can extend the time as long as genuine points are being made.

It is much better to set a short time and to extend it rather than set a long time and have people sitting around wondering what to say.

The red hat is different from the other hats with regard to timing. Only a short time is needed to get the red hat feeling from each of those present since there should not be explanations or qualifications. The expression of feeling should be brisk and definite. Often as little as one minute is enough for everyone present to express his or her feelings.

Guidelines

There is no one right sequence to follow. Any sequence of hats that makes sense to you will work. Some sequences are appropriate for exploration, some for problem solving, for dispute settlement, for decision making, and so forth. Just as a carpenter has to get used to the feel and use of tools, so it is important to get used to setting up sequences and using them.

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.

A red hat may be used immediately after the first blue hat. This is done in situations where it is believed that there are already strong feelings on the subject. The red hat is an opportunity to get those feelings out in the open right at the beginning.

Before the first elections in South Africa I was asked to teach the Six Hats method to the heads of the Peace Accord Committees who were responsible for solving local problems. They would often start their meetings with the red hat in order to give people a chance to express their feelings and emotions.

The initial red hat should not be used in certain situations. For instance, if the boss expresses his or her feelings, everyone may feel the need to agree with the boss. The initial red hat should also not be used if there are no pre-existing feelings. There is no point in asking people to adopt feelings so early.

In an assessment situation, it makes sense to put the yellow hat before the black hat. If, under the yellow hat, you cannot find much value to the idea, there is no point in proceeding further. On the other hand, if you find much value under the

yellow hat and then proceed to the black hat and find many obstacles and difficulties, you will be motivated to overcome the difficulties because you have seen the benefits. But if you start off by seeing all the difficulties, then your motivation is totally different.

Sometimes you may want to put a red hat after the final blue hat. This final red hat reflects back on the 'thinking performance':

What do we feel about our thinking?

Are we happy with the outcome?

Did we do a good job?

These are only some of the guidelines. There is a fuller set of guidelines with specific sequences for different situations in the formal training sessions given by authorized trainers, where there is an opportunity to select and practise sequences.

In general, any sequence that makes sense as a 'thinking strategy' is valid and will work.

Group and Individual

The most striking benefits of the Six Hats method are seen in group discussions or conversations. In such situations the method provides a framework that is much more effective than argument or free discussion.

The hats may also be used by an individual thinking on his or her own. The sequenced framework reduces confusion and ensures that all aspects are fully covered.

The hats may also be used in reports or other communications. Again, this allows every aspect to be covered. In a

report, the framework also allows all 'caution' aspects to be put forward without causing offence.

Individuals in Groups

Even when the Six Hats method is used for group meetings, the chairperson or facilitator still can ask individuals to do some individual thinking. That allows people to come up with more ideas. In a group discussion you are so busy listening to others that there may be little time to think.

... We are now switching to the yellow hat. I want you to spend two minutes thinking on your own before we open the discussion.

Such individual thinking is particularly useful with the green, yellow and black hats.

The chairperson may ask individuals to take some time for individual thinking even in the middle of a hat.

... Now I'd like you to do some green hat thinking on your own. I am not happy with the alternatives we have so far.

Although most groups sessions involve individuals freely expressing their ideas whenever they want (under the relevant hat), it is also possible to ask individuals specifically for their thinking.

... Mr Smith, we have not heard from you. What is your black hat thinking on this matter?

. . . I would like some yellow hat from you, Henrietta.

When a hat is introduced it is also possible to go around the group, individual by individual, to get each person's thinking under that hat. This is particularly useful when some individual thinking time has been allowed.