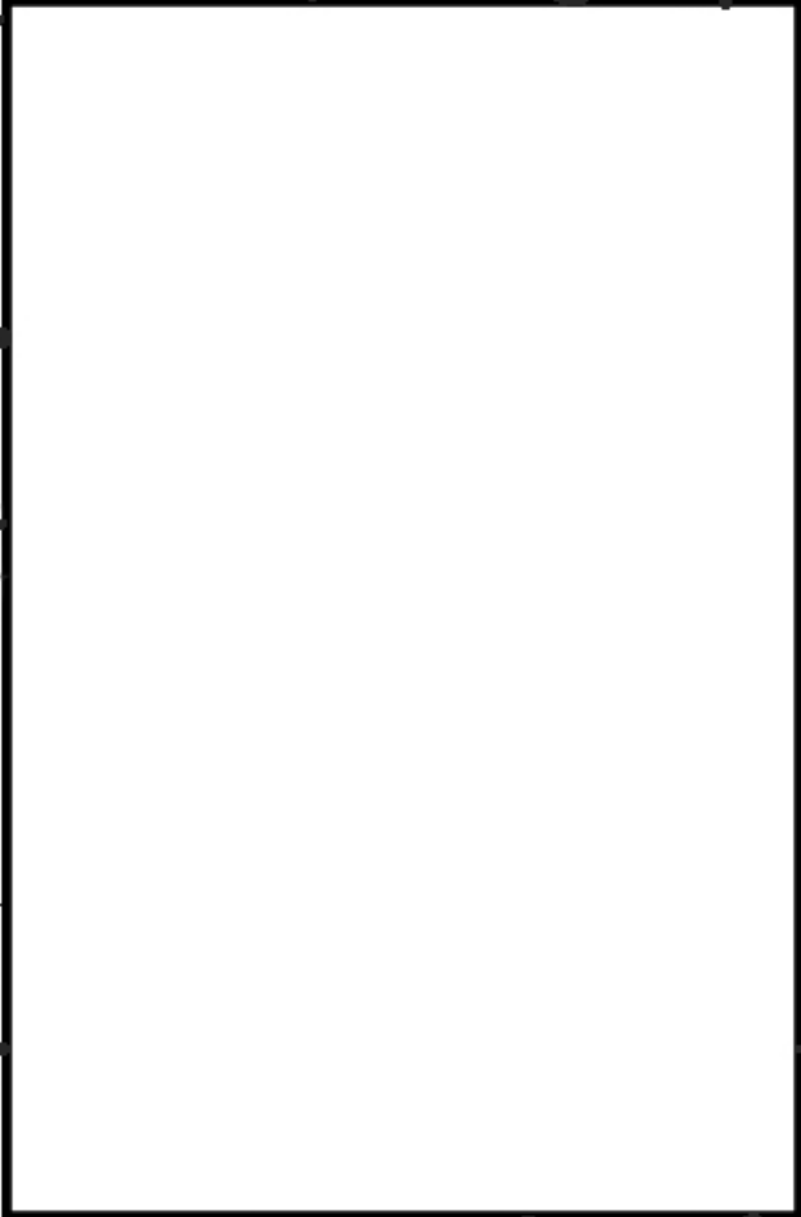


SIX

Thinking
Hats

Edward De Bono
edited and Revised



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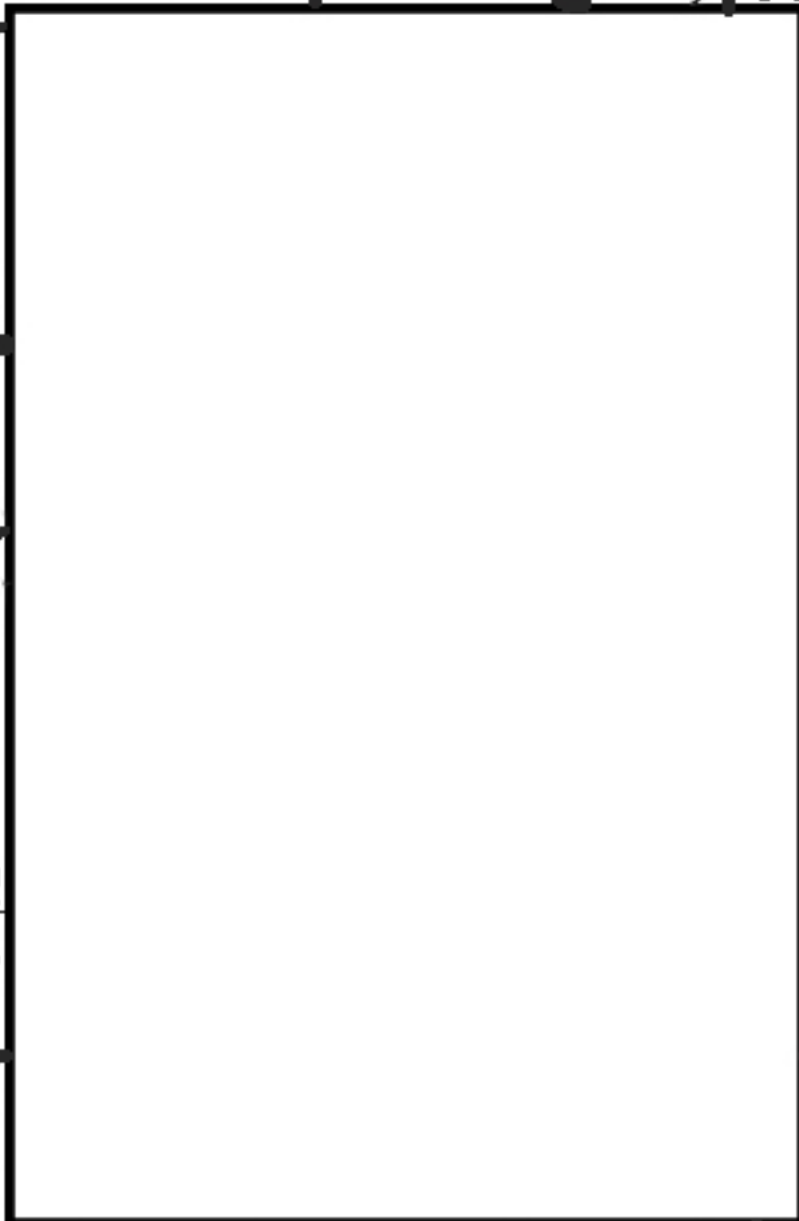
SIX THINKING HATS®

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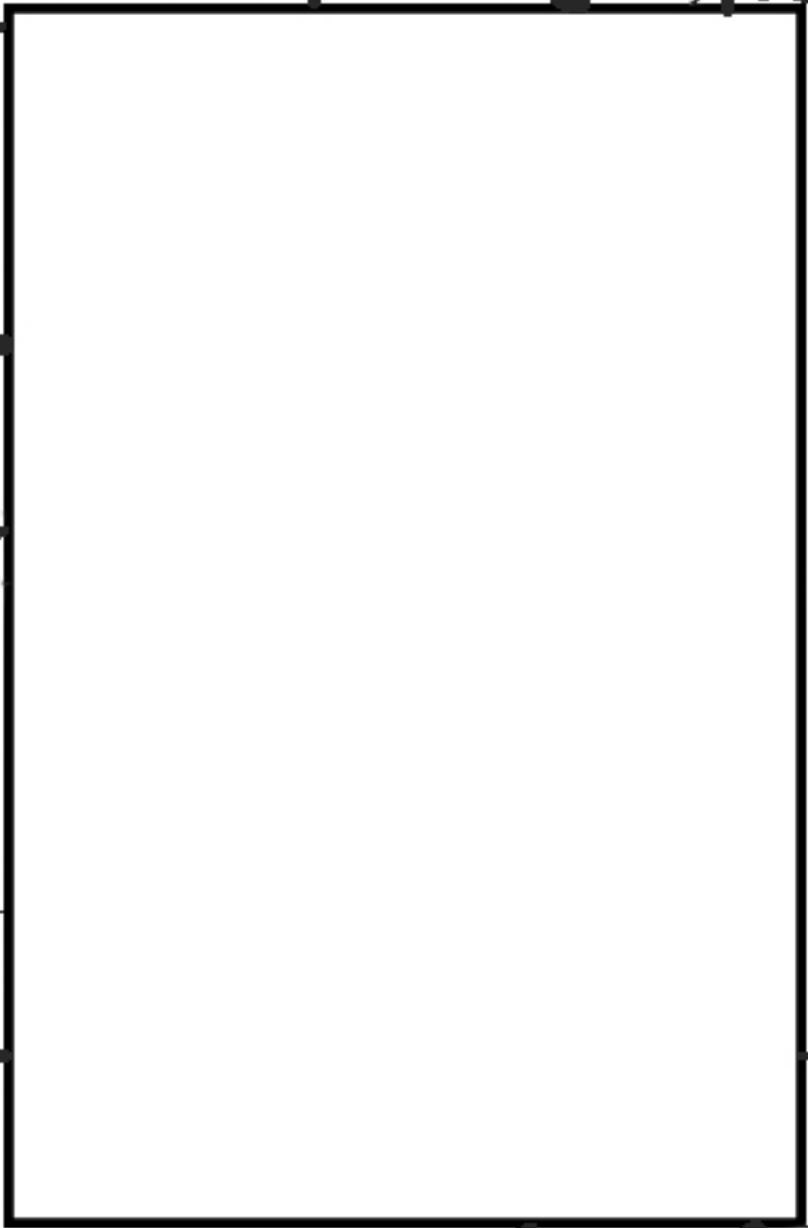
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Chapter 1

Introduction

An antelope grazing in Africa hears a sound in the grass. Immediately all the neuronal clusters concerned with danger are activated so that the lion is recognized as soon as it emerges from the grass, and the antelope is able to escape. Such sensitization is a key part of how the brain works and why it is so efficient.

It is not possible to be sensitized in different directions at the same time just as it would not be possible to design a golf club that was the best club for driving and at the same time the best club for putting. That is why the Six Hats method is essential. It allows the brain to maximize its sensitivity in different directions at different times. It is simply not possible to have that maximum sensitization in different directions all at the same time.

Argument versus Parallel Thinking

The basic idea behind Western thinking was designed about twenty-three hundred years ago by the Greek ‘Gang of Three’ and is based on argument.

Socrates put great emphasis on dialectic and argument. In 80 per cent of the dialogues in which he was involved (as written down by Plato) there is no constructive outcome at all. Socrates saw his role as simply pointing out what was ‘wrong’. He wanted to clarify the correct use of concepts like justice and love by pointing out incorrect usage. Plato believed that the ‘ultimate’ truth was hidden below appearances. His famous analogy is of a person chained up in a cave so that he can see only the back wall of the cave. There is a fire at the entrance to the cave. After a person enters the cave, his shadow is projected on to the back wall of the cave and that is all the chained-up person can see. Plato used this analogy to point out that as we go through life we can see only the ‘shadows’ of the truth.

Aristotle systematized inclusion/exclusion logic. From past experience we would put together ‘boxes’, definitions, categories or principles. When we came across something, we judged into which box it fell. Something could be in the box or not in the box. It could not be half in and half

out – nor could it be anywhere else.

As a result, Western thinking is concerned with ‘what is’, which is determined by analysis, judgement and argument.

That 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’.

In 1998, I was asked to give an opening talk at the Australian Constitutional Convention that was looking at the future of federation. I told the following story.

Once upon a time a man painted half his car white and the other half black. His friends asked him why he did such a strange thing. He replied: ‘Because it is such fun, whenever I have an accident, to hear the witnesses in court contradict each other.’

At the end of the convention the chairperson, Sir Anthony Mason, told me that he was going to use that story because it is so often the case in an argument that both sides are right but are looking at different aspects of the situation.

Many cultures in the world, perhaps even the majority of cultures, regard argument as aggressive, personal and non-constructive. That is why so many cultures readily take up the parallel thinking of the Six Hats method.

A Changing World

A thinking system based on argument is excellent just as the front left wheel of a car is excellent. There is nothing wrong with it at all. But it is not sufficient.

A doctor is treating a child with a rash. The doctor immediately thinks of some possible 'boxes'. Is it sunburn? Is it food allergy? Is it measles? The doctor then examines the signs and symptoms and makes a judgement. If the doctor judges that the condition fits into the 'measles' box, then the treatment of measles is written on the side of that 'box' and the doctor knows exactly what to do. That is traditional thinking at its best.

From the past we create standard situations. We judge into which 'standard situation box' a new situation falls. Once we have made this judgement, our course of action is clear.

Such a system works very well in a stable world. In a stable world the standard situations of the past still apply.

But in a changing world the standard situations may no longer apply.

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’.

Yet the basic tradition of Western thinking (or any other thinking) has not provided a simple model of constructive thinking. That is precisely what the Six Hats method (parallel thinking) is all about.

What Is Parallel Thinking?

There is a large and beautiful country house. One person is standing in front of the house. One person is standing behind the house. Two other people are standing at each side of the house. All four have a different view of the house. All four are arguing (by intercom) that the view each is seeing is the correct view of the house.

Using parallel thinking they all walk around and look at the front. Then they all walk around to the side, then the back and finally the remaining side. So at each moment each person is looking in parallel from the same point of view.

This is almost the exact opposite of argument, adversarial, confrontational thinking where each party deliberately takes an opposite view. Because each person eventually looks at all sides of the building, the subject is explored fully. Parallel thinking means that at any moment everyone is looking in the same direction.

But parallel thinking goes even further. 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 to choose 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.

Directions and Hats

The essence of parallel thinking is that at any moment everyone is looking in the same direction – but the direction can be changed. An explorer might be asked to look north or to look east. Those are standard direction labels. So we need some direction labels for thinking. What are the different directions in which thinkers can be invited to look?

This is where the hats come in.

In many cultures there is already a strong association between thinking and ‘thinking hats’ or ‘thinking caps’. The value of a hat as a symbol is that it indicates a role. People are said to be wearing a certain hat. Another advantage is that a hat can be put on or taken off with ease. A hat is also visible to everyone around. For those reasons I chose hats as the symbols for the directions of thinking.

Although physical hats are sometimes used, the hats are usually imaginary. Posters of the hats on the walls of meeting rooms often are used, however, as a reminder of the directions. There are six coloured hats corresponding to the six directions of thinking: white, red, black, yellow, green, blue.

Directions Not Descriptions

It is very important to note that the hats are directions and not descriptions of what has happened. It is not a matter of everyone saying what they like and then the hats being used to describe what has been said. It is a matter of setting out to think in that direction.

‘Let’s have some white hat thinking here’ means a deliberate focus on information. Everyone now tries to think of information that is available, information that

is needed, questions to be asked, other ways of getting information, and so on.

‘I want your red hat on this’ is a specific request for feelings, intuition and emotions on a particular issue.

‘That is good black hat thinking; now let us switch to some yellow hat thinking ...’ In this case the term black hat describes thinking that seems to be cautious and seems to point out possible difficulties, but the main intention is to ask for a switch to the yellow hat direction (benefits, values, and so forth).

It is extremely important to appreciate the difference between description and direction. A description is concerned with what has happened. A direction is concerned with what is about to happen.

‘I want you to look to the east’ is very different from ‘You have been looking to the east.’

‘I want you to cook some scrambled eggs’ is very different from ‘I see that you have cooked some scrambled eggs.’

Not Categories of People

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. Again, that is an example of 'what is' instead of 'what can be'.

In a race a thin man would usually beat a fat man ('what is'). But if the fat man learns to ride a bicycle, then the fat man will beat the thin man ('what can be').

There is a huge temptation to use the hats to describe and categorize people, such as 'she is black hat' or 'he is a green-hat person'. That temptation must be resisted. The hats are not descriptions of people but modes of behaviour.

It is true that some people may be permanently cautious and inclined to look for dangers. It is true that some people might always be bubbling with ideas and others might be better at focusing on facts. People may prefer one mode to another. People might be better at one mode than another. Nevertheless, the hats are not categories of people.

If you drive a car with manual gears, you use all the gears. In the engine of your car all the cylinders are firing. The hats are directions of thinking. Every person must be able, and skilled, to look in all the directions.

For those reasons the use of the hats as labels is dangerous because it destroys the whole point of the system, which is that everyone can look in every direction.

Note on Using the Thinking Hats

When people tell me that they have been using the Six Hats method, I often ask how they have been using it, and discover that sometimes they have been using it incorrectly. In a meeting, someone has been chosen as the black hat thinker, someone else as the white hat thinker, and so on. The people then keep those roles for the whole meeting. That is almost exactly the opposite of how the system should be used. 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.

Showing Off

Many people tell me that they enjoy argument because they can show off how clever they are. They can win arguments and demolish opponents. None of that is very constructive but there may be a human need to show off.

Thus showing off is not excluded from parallel thinking and the Six Hats method. A thinker now shows off by showing how many considerations he or she can put forward under the yellow hat, how many under the black hat, and so forth. You show off by performing well as a thinker. You show off by performing better as a thinker than others in the meeting. The difference is that this type of showing off is constructive. The ego is no longer tied to being right.

Playing the Game

There are all sorts of attempts made to change the personalities of people. It is believed that if you point out a personality type or a weakness, the person will seek to compensate for that weakness. Such methods are generally slow, ineffective and do not work.

Once people are put into a certain 'box' or category they may try to compensate. But the effort of compensation reminds them of 'what they are', so they sink even deeper

into that category.

Ever since Freud, the emphasis has been on analysis: find out the deep truths and motivations for action. Confucius's approach was almost the exact opposite. Instead of focusing on personality he chose to focus directly on behaviour. He urged you to use the right behaviour with your colleagues, your subordinates, your superiors and your family. Confucius was not the least bit interested in your personality or psychological make-up.

The Six Hats method follows the Confucian approach rather than the analytical one. The rules of behaviour are laid out. You follow those rules. If you are aggressive, no one is going to try to make you less aggressive. But if the yellow hat is in use, then you are to use your aggression in that direction.

By going straight to behaviour, the Six Hats method is much more acceptable and effective and quick than methods that set out to change personalities.

The 'game' aspect of the Six Hats is very important. If a game is being played, then anyone who does not obey the rules of the game is considered uncooperative. If there is a switch from the black hat (caution) to the yellow hat (possible benefits) and a person continues to lay out the potential dangers, then that person is seen to be refusing

to play the game. Getting people to ‘play the game’ is a very powerful form of changing behaviour.

Results

Over the years the results of using the Six Hats method have become increasingly clear. The results are based on feedback from many sources and fall into four broad categories that are summarized here.

Power

With the Six Hats method, the intelligence, experience and knowledge of all the members of the group are fully used. Everyone is looking and working in the same direction.

A magnet is powerful because all the particles are aligned in the same direction. That is not the case with argument or free discussion. With the argument mode (as in a court of law), each party seeks to win the case. If one party thinks of a point that might benefit the other party, then that point is never raised. The purpose is to win, not to explore the subject honestly.

It is totally absurd that a person should hold back information or a point of view because revealing it would weaken his or her argument. The focusing of the sun’s

rays can melt the toughest of metals. In the same way, the focusing of the mental ability of many people on a problem can more easily solve that problem.

Time Saving

Optus (in Australia) had set aside four hours for an important discussion. Using the Six Hats method the discussion was concluded in forty-five minutes.

From every side there are reports of how much quicker meetings become when the six hats are used. Meetings take half the time. Meetings take a third or a quarter of the time. Sometimes, as in the case of ABB, meetings take one-fifteenth of the time.

In the United States, managers spend nearly 40 per cent of their time in meetings. If the Six Hats method reduced all meeting times by 75 per cent, you would have created 30 per cent more manager time – at no extra cost whatsoever.

In normal thinking or argument, if someone says something, then others have to respond – even if only out of politeness. But that is not the case with parallel thinking.

With parallel thinking, every thinker at every moment is looking in the same direction. The thoughts are laid out in parallel. You do not respond to what the last person has said. You simply add another idea in parallel. In the end, the subject is fully explored quickly.

Normally, if two points of view are at odds, then they are argued out. With parallel thinking, both points of view are laid out alongside each other. Later on, if it is essential to decide between the two, a decision is made. So there is not argument at every step.

Removal of Ego

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.

Someone will choose to disagree on a point simply to show up the person who has made that point. If another person had made the point, there would have been full agreement. In general, we do not fully realize just how obstructive the ego is in preventing effective thinking.

During jury deliberations, there are often two personalities who refuse to agree whatever the evidence might be. Judges have told me that there is a much more serious problem than most people realize. Clearly, the problem destroys the basic value of the jury system. That is why there is now interest in several countries in training all juries in the Six Hats method. This would speed up deliberations by removing the ego problem.

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.

The Six Hats method provides neutral and objective exploration of a subject – argument does not.

One Thing at a Time

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 have to be cautious. We want to find benefits. Those are a lot of things that need doing.

Juggling with six balls at the same time is rather difficult. Tossing up one ball at a time is much easier.

With the Six Hats method, we try to do only one thing at a time. There is a time when we look for danger (black hat). There is a time when we seek new ideas (green hat). There is a time when we focus on information (white hat). We do not try to do everything at the same time.

With colour printing, each colour is printed separately, one at a time, and in the end the full colour effect is obtained. It is the same with Six Hat thinking – we do one thing at a time and in the end the full picture emerges.

Underneath all this is the absolute physiological need to separate out the types of thinking. As I mentioned in the introduction, the brain is sensitized to look for danger and sensitized to seek benefits through a different chemical setting.

Aeroplanes coming in to land often fly over car parks. If you tell yourself to notice the yellow cars, then suddenly the yellow cars stand out and make themselves visible. That is an example of sensitization.

You cannot be sensitized in different directions at the same time, so when we set out to do all aspects of thinking in the same moment, we are going to be suboptimal on all of them.

All the points mentioned in this section may seem obvious and logical. In fact, there is no mystery about them. When the Six Hats method is used, the advantages soon become clear. Instead of rambling, ego-driven meetings, meetings are now constructive, productive and much faster.

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.