


Creative Thinking



Executive coach Mandy Holloway sheds some light on how to apply the 'six thinking hats' framework to get through tough times.

This year may prove challenging for many business owners, leaders and managers if they choose to join others on the downward spiral of fear created by the current economic climate. Uncertain times are driving fearful thinking and behaviour because business owners don't know what to expect. It's important to resist the temptation to take this route, and empower yourself to make a critical step to ascend the 'upward spiral of courage' instead. This approach has a much better chance of improving your business creatively, passionately and in a way that inspires everyone to join you.

A key strategy for ascending the upward spiral of courage is using Edward de Bono's famous 'six thinking hats' framework. This has the potential to bring interest, creativity, integrity, courage and personal insight to every outcome delivered, every conversation completed and every decision you make for your business.

So why did de Bono develop this idea? Having used his work since the late 1980s, I have always found his explanation for why he wanted to help people improve their thinking incredibly powerful: "Intelligence is like the horsepower of a car. Thinking is like the skill of the car driver. Many highly intelligent people are poor thinkers and get caught in the 'intelligence trap'. Many less intelligent people have developed a high degree of skill in thinking."

De Bono saw the need to introduce a new way of thinking. He wanted a framework that did not solely rely on the more traditional way of thinking developed by what he called the 'Gang of Three' – Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. This traditional

thinking is based on analysis, judgement, argument and criticism. For a perfect example of the flaws in this type of thinking, watch the movie *Good Will Hunting* and look for the display of lateral thinking exhibited by Matt Damon's character.

Through years of using this framework, I have determined five powerful ways of using it to enhance business performance. You can use this framework to:

1. Inspire innovative thought.
2. Create a solution to a problem.
3. Direct thinking in meetings.
4. Make a critical decision.
5. Enable reflection and instigate 'real' learning within your business.

Reflection is Critical

Enabling reflection and instigating real learning for everyone in the business means you change the way people think and feel about business experiences and, ultimately, you position the business to improve its performance. Lessons from actual business experiences are brought to the surface in a very concrete way so they can be used quickly and easily by leaders for future business activities. In our fast-paced business world, people are not encouraged to sit and reflect on what they have just done and assess whether it was a good result – what could have been done differently, which benefits accrued from the approach and what can be shared with others so future performance is enhanced. Instead they move on to the next task, conversation or decision and within a short timeframe have little recall of past activity.

Taking time out to reflect and debrief personal and team performance is *the* most critical, and yet the most under-used,

performance-enhancement tool. With a disciplined approach to reflection, business performance is improved because what people learn every day as they work is unlocked and they are able to change the way they think about things as they confront them in the future.

The Six Hats in Practice

The framework is based on the old saying, “put on your thinking hat”. Edward de Bono takes it further to say you must put it on in such a way as to direct your attention with a special focus. Accordingly, he created six hats, each of a different colour, to depict the specific focus of the thinking required of each hat.

As a leader, you can use this framework with your team, or as an individual use it to reflect on an experience. Your thinking has a focus and the options you create are far more expansive. These are the six thinking hats and how they can be used in your business:

Blue Hat

Visualise the sky to remind you of why the blue hat is important – it is the big picture, the outcome you are looking for; it creates the focus and defines the purpose for the thinking.

For example, a team within the business has just completed a project and using the blue hat you agree to use this framework to help the team explore how to deliver on a similar project in a more effective and efficient way.

White Hat

Visualise a white piece of paper and the facts and information you put onto it. The purpose of the white hat is to establish what information is:

- known
- available
- needed
- missing

So the project team would extract information with the comparison of a budget to actual time and costs, for example.

Yellow Hat

Visualise sunshine and optimism because this is what the yellow hat represents. It ensures a positive focus drives the thinking. You share thoughts on the benefits and value created by the task just completed, the conversation just had or the way the team worked together to achieve an outcome.

The project team members would share things like the benefits realised and how effectively they worked as a team to deliver the outcomes.

Black Hat

Visualise the black robes of the judge as he sits in judgement to show what is wrong and what is not working. Use this hat to assess risk with critical thinking. Thanks to the ‘Gang of Three’ most of you are very adept at using this hat.

For the project just completed, the team members share what went wrong and what didn’t work.

Red Hat

Visualise the burning embers of a fire and the warmth it creates and link this to the red hat where you share your feelings and emotions without apology, justification or explanation.

For the project just completed, the team members share their feelings at the start of the project, at specific milestones of completion and now that it is finished.

Green Hat

Visualise trees for the essence of the green hat – it is the hat of creativity. The best way to approach this is to say “what if...” and not allow your thinking to be constrained in any way. Here you share new ideas, generate possibilities, think outside of the box and have the courage to share your thoughts with others.

For the project under review, the team members are able to establish what they would do differently if they were to undertake a project like this again.

I suggest returning to the blue hat again to summarise and conclude your efforts.

The Theory in Action

You can feel the power of the six thinking hats tool by reflecting on the experiences and performance of a:

- Project team and its impact on business performance.
- Business team over a specified period of time or on the delivery of a specific outcome.
- Group of people as they interacted in a meeting.
- Person who made a critical decision.
- Number of people who participated in a conversation.

To apply this thinking framework, within the next month take the opportunity to reflect on your personal performance using the guide above either at the end of a time period or at the end of a specific business activity such as a conversation or a meeting.

Once you have done this, use the six thinking hats framework to debrief a team of people within the business to capture lessons learned from a specific business activity or a specific time period. Conclude this debrief by communicating what can be done differently in the future.

To assess the level of improvement from what is done differently in the future as a result of your debrief, remember to determine key measurement criteria.

Operating on the upward spiral of courage requires you to take an honest look at how and what you are doing and being prepared to change. This framework directs your thinking so you bring creativity, integrity, courage and personal insight to every outcome delivered, every conversation completed and every decision made. **em**

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