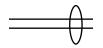# Six Thinking Hats: Making Good Decisions at Your Session Meeting

A summary by Dorothy Henderson

With thanks to the Rev. Dale Woods of Brandon, Manitoba
for his contribution of an article on the *Six Thinking Hats*

How to use this article

Option 1: Have minister(s) and elders read it, then agree to have the moderator or chair person be the "blue hat" for one particular issue. Have the six coloured hats and their brief descriptions available (see p. 2) so people can be reminded of what each stands for, or, if your session is adventurous, have six coloured hats on a central table with the hat band giving the brief descriptions for the meaning of each hat.

Option 2: Have one member of session read the article (or perhaps even the book) and make a presentation to session. Use the process in an "easy" decision such as whether or not to hold an elder's retreat. Talk together about whether it was a helpful process and how often it might be used.

Some issues that may be helpful to discuss with the *Six Thinking Hats*
- Term service
- Programs for your congregation
- Pastoral care procedures
- How to involve new people in leadership
- Whether or not to hire a new staff person
- Whether to do a mission trip or pave the parking lot
  etc. etc.

Have you ever left session meeting asking, "What did the others *really* think or feel?" Or have you ever heard, "I feel this is a warm and friendly church," but there is little evidence to back that up. Making decisions in session can be complex and difficult. *The Six Thinking Hats* by Edward De Bono reminds us that thinking is a skill and can be improved.[1]

In a session meeting you will not want to over-structure the use of a system such as this, but it is helpful to have some procedures that ensures a wide usage of the different types of thinking required to make good decisions.

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[1] *Six Thinking Hats*, Little, Brown and Company, 1999

Why would you use the *Six Thinking Hats* in a session meeting?

- The biggest enemy to clear thinking is complexity. Using the *Six Thinking Hats* breaks down a complex issue into manageable parts.
- It can be playful and fun. Who says decision-making should be deadly serious?
- Instead of having all kinds of thinking going on at the same time, the hats allow us to focus on one particular type of thinking at a time.
- It ensures that one type of thinking doesn't dominate all discussions.
- It allows for the different thinking styles of people to be used.

De Bono suggests that our decisions may be limited because our thinking process is too limited. To broaden our understanding of thinking, De Bono describes six thinking hats.

Each hat has a different purpose. Each hat brings a different element to the discussion.

Each person has a preferred hat—a preferred thinking style. Learning which preferred styles are present in a group helps the group be more tolerant and understanding. Bert is not just a negative person. Bert is a person who prefers to use the black hat. But that is okay, because Annie prefers to use the yellow hat and Doris is a green hat thinker. We need all types of hats to make good decisions. Being aware of the six hats helps to ensure that everyone's thinking style is included.

The six hats are:
1. Blue hat: Organizes the thinking process
2. Green hat: Generates new ideas and encourages creativity
3. Yellow hat: Is hopeful and positive, sunny, optimistic
4. Black hat: Covers the negative aspects, why something cannot or shouldn't be done[2]
5. Red hat: Allows the emotional view of an issue
6. White hat: Presents the facts, is neutral and objective

Sequence for using the hats

The colours of the hats relate to their function and may be used in any order after a group is used to working with them. However, at the beginning, it is probably better to use them in a specific order.

The blue hat is most commonly used by the chairperson who negotiates with the group which order to use.

As the group is learning to work with the hats, follow this order:

Green
 Yellow
  Black
   Red
White may be used at any time.

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[2]As I (Dorothy Henderson) was reading and editing this article, I was aware of the fact that many people with dark skin object to having the colour black used for stereotyping ideas or concepts as negative, critical, the-glass-is-half-empty type of people. Of course they should object! I would too. If I were using this in a church group, I would simply change the "black hat" to "purple hat" but because I want to be faithful to Edward De Bono's concepts, I've used black in this article.

In a meeting, says De Bono, we can become aware of which hat is being worn and be free to ask for another hat to expand our thinking. "We've had a lot of black hat thinking today, but how would we view this issue if we were to wear a yellow hat."

Details on each hat

1. Blue hat: Is the conductor of the orchestra of thinking

Blue hat thinking oversees the whole thinking process and keeps the big picture in mind. Blue hats provide the overview. The blue hat person:
- provides focus, which is needed for a good discussion
- may remind us when we need to switch hats to add to our depth of understanding
- suggests when we need to stop
- looks at how we feel about the discussion so far
- may point out that we're stuck at the creative process (green hat) and need to go to facts (white hat)
- concludes the discussion or meeting

Blue hat thinking usually falls to the role of the chairperson but may be done by group: e.g. "Let's go around the table and see where you think we are at this time."

2. Green hat: Generates new ideas and encourages creativity

Green hat thinking:
- finds ways to do things differently
- is concerned with change
- looks for ways to do things more simply or better

Green hat thinking is about movement: Where will this idea take us? This is the time to generate provocative or reversal ideas. For instance, what would happen if people took offering out of the offering plate instead of putting it in? Creative pauses should be built into work on a regular basis so introverts have time to consider and reflect.

Although critical thinking is not part of this stage of thinking, it is appropriate to 'shape' new ideas. For instance, someone might reflect that the proposed idea might work well in a large church but, since you are a small church, how could it work?

3. Yellow hat: Is hopeful, positive, sunny, optimistic

Once ideas have been generated, they are usually followed up with yellow hat thinking. Yellow hat thinking:
- allows for development of an idea
- offers a positive assessment of the idea
- supports the benefits and values of the idea
- asks, "What good might come from this idea?"

The yellow hat should not be confused with "feeling good" about an idea. (That belongs under red hat.) The yellow hat should be able to provide support for the idea. For instance, "I think a stewardship program will work in our congregation because I heard that this same program worked in twelve other congregations across Canada."

When assessing possibilities that come from an idea, categories can be used to rate the idea. For instance, you might rate the ideas as a)proven b)very likely c)based on experience and what we know d)good chance e)an even change f)remote or long shot.

Yellow hat thinking looks at opportunities, visions and hopes.

4. Black hat: covers the negative side of the idea, why something cannot or should not be done

This is the hat of critical judgment, a chance to play the "devil's advocate." This hat helps to identify why something may not work. It is not to be confused with red hat thinking: e.g. "I just don't like this idea." Black hat thinking:
- gives logic
- allows people who disagree with the idea to voice their opinion without being judged as the pessimist in the crowd
- allows people to look at an issue from another point of view
- gives people a specific time to view their negative thoughts so that negativity doesn't take over the entire meeting

When it comes to using the black hat some observations need to be made. First, it is always more immediately gratifying to point out the weaknesses of something than to point out the strengths. Once the weaknesses have been pointed out, nothing further needs to be done. There is immediate gratification. But, if an idea is supported, there is no gratification until the idea is worked out. Generally speaking, it is easier to see the negative than the positive and once the negative is stated, expressing the positive is an uphill battle. It is best to express the positive first (the yellow hat) and then allow the black hat. Everyone should be asked to think of the positive aspects first and then consider whatever difficulties or weaknesses there might be. Black hat thinking can then try to help the positive ideas by asking questions like: Can this idea work? Are there any benefits to doing this? Is this worth doing? Does this support our mission or vision?

Black hat thinking is not to be confused with being argumentative. It is simply the objective attempt to put the negative elements on the table. It should not be confused with expression of emotions, which falls under the red hat. In case of new ideas, the yellow hat should always be used before the black hat.

5. Red hat: Gives the emotional view to an issue

The red hat is the opposite to the white hat. Our emotions are a necessary part of the thinking process, not an intrusion into "let's just have the facts." Since emotions are always present, it is helpful to have a formal

and neutral way for people to express them. Here is an example of red hat thinking: "Don't ask me why, but I think two services would be a big mistake."

Red hat thinking:
- asks for hunches, intuitions, impression without any particular reason or basis
- allows people to express their emotions rather than bury them or take them out to the parking lot
- allows emotions to be expressed during the meeting but not take over the meeting
- allows people to speak about their emotions without having to justify them

6. White hat: Neutral, objective, only the facts

This hat calls for the facts in a neutral way without any arguments. It is harder than it might seem to give facts without making an interpretation. For instance, someone might say, "The giving in the congregation is down 25% because people don't like the new hymn book." Being down 25% may be a fact, but the rest is interpretation that needs to be checked out.

White hat thinking:
- separates believed facts from checked facts
- no interpretation or point of view should be attached to a fact
- puts forward as many facts as possible
- does not use facts to support already preconceived ideas or assumptions.

The key to white hat thinking is to be neutral and present information much the way a computer would.