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RACONTEUR

6

THINKING HATS  
FOR MARKETERS

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## IN BRIEF

Four decades ago, Edward de Bono came up with a concept called Six Thinking Hats to help people make decisions. In the 1970's, when good ideas and theories weren't a dime a dozen, there was time to learn and implement such concepts in a business, and watch that labour yield fruits.

Today, with the top ten Slideshares being emailed straight to every business inbox every day, and someone else always proposing something new, we've lost both the time to apply great business theory – and the art of doing it.

Decision-making is a complex process. Research tells us that the average business deal or decision now involves 5.4 stakeholders. And when it comes to decisions about marketing – or brand – or anything go-to-market related, the unique cocktail of caution, creativity, calculation and credit-taking effectively renders businesses almost powerless. What suffers as a result, is the introduction of new ideas – the bold risk-taking that wins big battles – the

ability to see the bigger picture – and the constructive collaboration that enables a business to be agile. But if agility is as sought after as it's said to be these days, then reinvesting some dedicated time to Six Thinking Hats – and what it means for business decision-making, particularly in marketing – is well worth the time.



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The basic premise is that thinking is the ultimate human resource, as de Bono points out early in his book. But too often decision-making meetings turn into arguments, with each individual representing his or her own agenda and viewpoint, with little consideration or time for anything else. This individualistic approach ultimately leads to thinking that's distinctly 'inside the box' – people who come forward with great ideas can't find backing from others who will stick their necks out for someone else, or can't find validation because nay-saying is the easiest thing to do, second to sticking to what's already been tried and tested. That's why strong brands outperform weak brands by 20% and why 85% of decisions we make are made by our subconscious which results in repetitive decision-making patterns. So to re-prioritise thinking, the ultimate human resource, we need to have a framework that allows group thinking to flourish and yield the kinds of decisions and buy-in that actually help move the commercial needle – a result that's never been more important than in this opportunity-riddled business landscape.

### The Rules

**1.** The whole group has to wear the same colour hat at the same time – it's not one hat per person



**2.** The goal is constructive decision-making, so everyone needs to agree to wear each hat and to play by the rules

### The Hats



#### WHITE

"Just the facts, please"



#### RED

"I've got this hunch..."



#### BLACK

"It's risky if we..."



#### YELLOW

"This idea is great because..."



#### GREEN

"If we could market on the moon"



#### BLUE

"Let's think about thinking"

## IN DEPTH



### WHITE: information

The white hat is concerned with objectivity above all else. When your team is wearing this hat, you need to get the group to focus on the facts and figures, and on information gathering activities that bring to the table every piece of relevant information. Neutrality is very important here – the group should be able to lay out the data and identify what information is missing that would help to complete the picture – that data should also act as a framework for the conversation. For a marketing decision with senior stakeholders, this might include reach, circulation figures, potential for long-term use, cost, etc.

Why think like this?

**Good information is the basis of any strong solution.**



### RED: emotion

The red hat is concerned with intuition and emotion. It's virtually the opposite of neutral. Stakeholders wearing the red hat can take an emotional view, prioritising 'gut instincts' or how they feel about a particular avenue or decision or idea. Red hat thinking also helps to uncover why certain individuals feel strongly one way or another – do they have something personally at stake? Are they pushing an idea because it's theirs in the first place? The red hat also allows the decision making process to make room for values – and given people buy people first, it's often essential to be able to revisit the 'whys' and the 'beliefs' behind important decisions.

Why think like this?

**"Any good decision must be emotional in the end".**



### BLACK: risk

The black hat is concerned with risk. This is the hat of caution, inconsistencies, and weaknesses. Wearers need to use this time to assess what can go wrong and where to be cautious. The greatest use of the black hat is to allow the group to do a risk assessment of whatever's being proposed – for a marketing project, it might be considering 'spill' or longevity or perception by employees, for example. The main point to remember, though, about the black hat, is that this is the one that most people wear most often. The Six Thinking Hats practice helps groups and individuals to break away from being stuck in 'black hat meetings'.

Why think like this?

**Risk assessment points out matters that need attention and any weak links.**



### YELLOW: possibility

The yellow hat is for possibility and positivity. This hat is used for taking an optimistic approach. It's used to help the group spot opportunities and possibilities, and to see the value in an idea. The yellow hat helps the group aim toward constructive rather than destructive thinking, forcing even the most cynical of participants to find value and potential, even for ideas they don't like. And, in an era when marketing has become overly dominated by metrics and counting, this hat helps the group explore the highly important factors like educating prospects, building rapport and developing a thought leadership stance that make all the difference to market share.

Why think like this?

**Too often we're too argumentative and unimaginative to do anything but shoot down ideas.**



### GREEN: creativity

The green hat focuses the group on creativity. Green hat time is about bringing new ideas to the table – the more bizarre and wild, the better. De Bono notes that the green hat is mostly about 'lateral thinking' – exploring possibilities rather than going for the same old ideas or tactics. This hat encourages the group to propose alternative ideas and even revisit things that the organisation has long dismissed – for example, proposing in a marketing meeting at a digital-first company that they consider spending £100k on a fully print-based campaign. The purpose is to explore what 'movement' can be gotten out of such an idea – what traction and positive results.

Why think like this?

**We need to acknowledge that "creativity is a key ingredient" in thinking.**



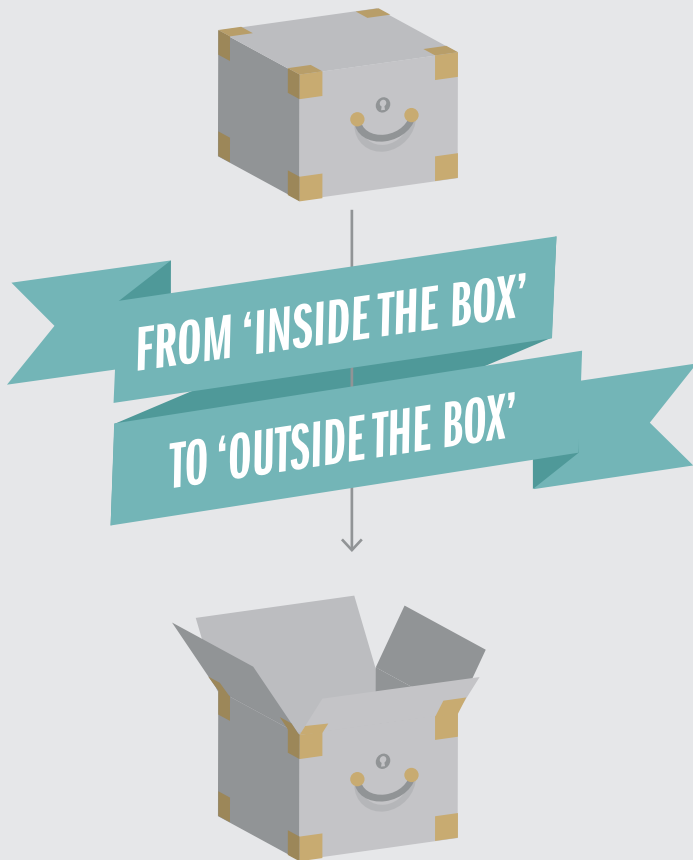
### BLUE: control

The blue hat is for control and organisation. This hat allows the group to set up a process and infrastructure to control the meeting, deciding on objectives, structuring the conversation, and summarising outcomes and next steps – it's the 'process management' element of the decision-making agenda. Often one facilitator will keep this hat on throughout the meeting – this individual can remind the group to focus, ask the group to switch to the next hat, and generally control the thinking process. Blue hat thinking helps to ensure the group is thinking clearly, sticking to objectives, and progressing toward the right outcome – a collective decision.

Why think like this?

**Effective and sustainable decision-making requires a process.**

## IN ACTION



### Static

CEB's data tells us that the average B2B buying decision involves more than five people. With every additional person, the risk of disagreement, complexity, confusion and time pressure increases. That means that, by and large, organisations, while attempting to take a more collaborative approach to decision making by involving more stakeholders, are actually weighing themselves down with disagreement,

agenda competition, ego and pressure. Marketers, specifically, are being pressured to involve other senior business decision-makers on the exploration and sign-off of high-profile marketing campaigns and projects, due to the widespread acceptance that marketing's role in driving business is becoming more and more vital. The pressure to deliver everything quickly and at scale makes less worth focusing

on new, big ideas – and people end up firefighting. As de Bono pointed out – “the biggest enemy of thinking is complexity” – and you'd be hard-pressed to find a meeting now where the sole agenda of the person proposing the idea isn't to fight it through, while everyone else's is to be cynical without having to take the fall. This leads to over-reliance on old ideas rather than big ideas – and organisations are stuck at 'static'.

### Agile

Where Six Thinking Hats fits in, then, is with transforming regular 'in the box' thinking into the opposite – thinking that is agile, creative, exploratory, guided by intuition but backed by facts. The purpose of this kind of thinking is to simplify the process of thinking itself and deal with things one at a time, and to allow for a *switch* in thinking

to make use of everyone's multiple facets and capabilities, which so often get waylaid. Agile thinking works on reducing conflict and maximising productivity and collaboration – it gets away from being bogged down in politics, in everyone assuming the same role they always take, and in tired ideas. Great businesses focused on big things surely want

to create the luxury of more ways of thinking about how to approach a problem – it'll always lead to a more robust solution. A Six Thinking Hats meeting means you can generate a 360 degree view of a problem or opportunity – and make a better, more cohesive decision that everyone feels more bought into and more confident in.

## IN SUMMARY

The average decision time – and quality of the decision – is vastly different with or without Six Thinking Hats applied. While we can't give you numbers, we can tell you this theory has been used over the past forty years from organisations as large as Siemens to communities as small as elementary schools. Why do we think it's worthwhile? Because, as de Bono himself points out, "you show off by performing well as a thinker"


– good thinking is therefore part of high performance culture. And in this era of fast decisions, pressure, pushing, speed, and nothing new under the sun, where too often we're all plagued by stagnant ideas and risk-averse marketing and management, the one decent piece of advice that's travelled down from de Bono over these forty years that's a clear and simple call to duty is this: **think better.**

## RACONTEUR

Want to understand more about Thinking Hats for Marketers? Get in touch:

**Will Brookes**  
Head of Publishing

 [wb@raconteur.net](mailto:wb@raconteur.net)

 0203 428 5238

**Sources:**

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Edward de Bono's book Six Thinking Hats