

8 parallel thinking – the six hats

For about two thousand four hundred years we have been satisfied with argument as a way of thinking. The method was designed by the Greek Gang of Three: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

Argument is an excellent method and has served us well. At the same time, as we have seen, it is unsophisticated. Each side makes a 'case' and then seeks to defend that case and prove the other 'case' to be wrong. It says, in short: 'I am right and you are wrong.' (See also Chapter 5.)

In argument the motivation may be high because it is an aggressive motivation. The actual exploration of the subject is low. As mentioned in Chapter 2, a prosecutor in a court of law will not mention points which help the defence case and will certainly not make an effort to find them. The same holds for the defence attorney.

We use argument not because we think it is such a wonderful method – but because we do not know any other method.

In 1985 I designed the alternative method of 'parallel thinking', which is now widely used in business and in education: from four-year-olds in school to senior executives in some of the world's largest corporations. One corporation used to spend thirty days on their multi-national project discussions. Using parallel thinking, they do the same thing in two days. Wage negotiations in a mine used to take three weeks. Using parallel thinking, they are now concluded in forty-five minutes. On another occasion a union said to management that they refused to negotiate unless the method of parallel thinking was used. MDS, a company in Canada, reckoned they saved \$20 million in the first year they used parallel thinking. Siemens, the largest corporation in Europe, estimated they reduced product development time by 50 per cent using the method. Some judges in the USA are having their juries use the method – with very promising results.

The method is widely used in family discussions because it allows every party to put forward their thinking.

Parallel thinking is very different from the 'ego-driven' and 'battle-oriented' method of argument. Those who have got used to the method find a return to argument very primitive.

In one school the staff used the method in their own discussions as well as teaching the method to the pupils. One day there were visitors who did not know the method, so the staff went back to normal argument, and reported that argument now seemed crude and unsatisfactory.

CO-OPERATIVE EXPLORATION

Imagine there are four people standing around a square building. Each person is facing a different side. Each person insists that what he or she sees is the proper view of the building. They argue via walkie-talkies.

In parallel thinking each person would walk round to one side of the building. They would now each describe what they saw. Then they would all walk around to another side of the building and again describe what they saw. The same procedure for the third side, and then the fourth side.

So, all parties look at the matter from the same point of view and describe what they see. In the end there has been a full exploration of the building (the matter being discussed).

For the method of work, it is essential that at any moment everyone is looking 'in parallel' in the same direction.

THE SIX THINKING HATS

In 1985 I devised the Six Hats method of better thinking, a method that will help you enhance your conversation and so develop a beautiful mind.

The metaphor of six coloured hats – white, red, black, yellow, green and blue – is used to align the thinkers or members of the discussion so that they are all looking in

the same direction at any one time. It is essential that everyone is wearing the same hat at the same moment. It is completely wrong for different people to be wearing different hats.

Why hats?

You can put on or take off a hat easily and deliberately.

Hats have an association with thinking – ‘Put on your thinking cap.’

Hats are used to indicate roles – ‘Wearing my police hat/my parent hat’ and so on.

There is no need for there to be physical hats. Many boardrooms around the world now have posters of the hats on the wall or small symbolic hats that can be put on the table. The hats are, nevertheless, metaphorical.

THE WHITE HAT

The white hat suggests paper and computer print-outs. The white hat means ‘information’. When the white hat is in use everyone is focusing on information.

It is no longer the usual matter of one person saying something and another person disagreeing. When the white hat is in use, everyone is focusing on information – in parallel.

What do we know?

What do we need to know?

What is missing?

What questions should we ask?

How might we get the information we need?

Information can range from hard facts, which can be checked, to soft information like rumours and personal experience.

If the information conflicts then both versions are put down alongside each other. For example:

‘The last plane for New York leaves at 9.30 pm’, and ‘The last plane for New York leaves at 10.30 pm.’ Both versions are noted. When it becomes important to check which may be true, then at that point the effort is made to see which version is right.

Every person involved is now making a full effort to explore the subject and to lay out the information available and the information needed. It is no longer a matter of only looking for the information that fits your point of view and your case.

It is not unlike asking everybody ‘to look north’ and to report what they see. Each person now makes an effort to describe what he or she sees as accurately as possible.

THE RED HAT

Think of red as fire and warm. The red hat represents emotions, feelings and intuition.

This is a very important hat. In normal thinking your feelings and emotions are not supposed to come in. Of

course, the emotions do come in – you merely disguise them as logic. So if emotions are not allowed they influence all the thinking offered.

The red hat allows emotions and feeling. The red hat legitimises emotions and gives them a formal place:

I do not like this idea at all.

My feeling is that this simply will not work.

My intuition is that raising the price will destroy the market.

My gut feeling is that this is highly dangerous.

I feel it is a waste of time.

A very important point is that under the red hat you do not have to give any reasons at all for your ‘feelings’. You just express your feelings. They exist in you – so you express them. The reason for this is that in many cases the reasons behind the feelings are not clearly known (as in intuition) and therefore people would not put forward their feelings if they could not give reasons, so no reasons should be given – even if the reasons are known.

Intuition can be based on experience in the field. For instance:

My intuition is that she is the right person for the job.

My intuition is that the costs on this project will escalate rapidly.

My intuition is that there are internal office politics behind that decision.

My intuition is that the economy will start to turn up in the next quarter.

Intuition is a complex judgement. The thinker may not even be aware of all the components that go into the judgement. Intuition is often right – but not always. When they told the great Einstein about Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, Einstein replied that his intuition was that nature did not work that way and that 'God did not play dice'. It seems Einstein's intuition was wrong. In the end intuition can only be based on personal experience and personal thinking.

Nevertheless, intuition is a useful ingredient, a useful component, in thinking. There are some areas where decisions have to be made on intuition because there is no other way: 'My intuition is that this proposal will not be acceptable to both sides and the conflict will continue.' Or: 'My intuition is that this fashion will not catch on.'

When there is no other way of checking something then intuition plays an important role. At other times intuition is an ingredient or one factor to be taken into account.

THE BLACK HAT

This is the most used of hats in normal behaviour. The black hat is the basis of 'critical thinking'. The word 'critical' comes from the Greek 'kritikos', which means judge, and critical thinking is judgement thinking: is this right or is it wrong? The basis of argument and western thinking in general is the black hat.

The black hat is an excellent hat and probably the most useful of all the hats. The black hat stops us from doing things that are wrong, illegal or dangerous.

I prefer to use the word 'caution' with the black hat. Other words might be 'careful' or 'risk assessment' and we can ask ourselves: 'Does this fit?'

Does this fit our values?

Does this fit our resources?

Does this fit our strategy and objectives?

Does this fit our abilities?

Because the black hat may point out dangers, faults and problems, it does not make it a 'bad hat'. A doctor who deals with illness is not therefore a bad person. The lookout on a ship who indicates that there are reefs ahead is an excellent person.

The black hat can be used in a number of different ways:

to indicate a fault in logic (that does not follow . . .)

to point out incorrect information

to point out faults and weaknesses

to point out why something does not fit

to point out the 'downside'

to point out potential problems

In general the black hat covers all 'caution' aspects.

THE YELLOW HAT

The black hat is very much part of our thinking culture in argument and elsewhere. It is also very much part of education. Since the purpose of education is to tell youngsters 'how the world really is' there is a need to let them know when they have got something wrong.

In contrast, the yellow hat is almost entirely neglected. Under the yellow hat we look for values, benefits and why something *should* work.

This positive aspect of thinking is largely neglected.

We need to develop 'value sensitivity'. This means being sensitive to value. Without value sensitivity, creativity can be a waste of time. I have sat in on creative meetings where good ideas were generated, but even the people generating the ideas could not see the full value of their own ideas.

Value sensitivity means looking at something with the intention of finding the values in it. We are very ready to find fault – but not at all ready to find value. The bias is entirely towards the negative.

Under the yellow hat major insights can happen. People suddenly see values they have never seen before. There can be sudden revelations about values which are not very obvious.

The yellow hat invites everyone to make an effort to find value.

Suppose someone is very much against an idea which has been proposed. Under the black hat that person

points out all the dangers and disadvantages of the idea. Then it is the turn of the yellow hat and everyone is supposed to find values. If that person cannot see any value in the idea but everyone else can, then that person is seen to be stupid. If everyone can see value, why can you not see value? This is very different from argument, where you make no effort at all to find value in an idea you do not like. Under the yellow hat every thinker is 'challenged' to find value.

In argument you show off by winning arguments, by attacking the other point of view and defending your own. With parallel thinking you show off by performing better under every hat. So under the black hat you think of more caution points than anyone else, and under the yellow hat you think of more value points than anyone else. In this way all the brain power available is seeking to explore the subject honestly and thoroughly. It is no longer a matter of making a case or winning an argument. In practice, the difference between the two approaches is huge.

Would you buy an expensive car and then put inferior gas into the tank?

Why pay good brains a high salary and then only get part of their thinking? Because parallel thinking encourages every thinker to think 'fully and objectively' about a subject, the method is becoming increasingly used in business.

Imagine a boardroom meeting with several very clever and experienced people sitting around the table. Someone is talking and proposing a strategy. What is

everyone else doing? Mostly they are trying to find a fault in what is said. This allows them to contribute and to exercise their ego. What a huge waste of brain power that it should be limited to operating only in the critical mode!

Why pay high salaries to clever people and then choose to use only part of their thinking?

THE GREEN HAT

Think of vegetation, growth and energy. Think of branches and sprouting. Think of creative energy.

The green hat is the productive hat. The green hat is the generative hat. The green hat is the creative hat.

The black and yellow hats are judgement hats. The white hat asks for information. The red hat asks for feelings, emotions and intuition.

The green hat asks for ideas, alternatives, possibilities and designs.

What can we do? What are the alternatives?

Why did this happen? What are the possible explanations? The chairman might say: 'We need some new ideas here.' Or: 'Let's have both the obvious alternatives and some new ones.' Or: 'We need some green hat thinking right here.'

The green hat is an invitation to creativity.

Instead of creativity happening when one person has an idea and everyone else gets ready to jump on that idea and attack it, creativity is now a formal request. Under the

green hat there is a time, place and expectation for creative thinking. Everyone is challenged and 'put on the spot'. You are required to make a creative effort and a creative contribution. If not you keep quiet.

What is especially interesting, in practice, is that people who have never considered themselves to be creative suddenly make a creative effort and find that they are much more creative than they had thought themselves to be. People who would never have interjected a creative idea into a serious meeting now find that when creativity is an 'expectation' they can produce new ideas.

These may be ideas that are in use elsewhere. They may be new ideas that a person has had for some time. They may be new ideas that are produced there and then through natural creativity. They may be new ideas produced through the formal and deliberate use of lateral thinking tools such as provocation and random entry, for instance.

The search for alternatives should always include the obvious ones. This is followed by a search for less obvious alternatives and an attempt to generate new alternatives. Simple and almost obvious ideas can be as useful as exotic ideas.

New ideas can range from ideas which are very logical once they have been expressed through ideas that are probable to ones that are just possible and, finally, to ideas that are on the side of fantasy (but which can still serve to provoke good ideas).

Once the habit of creativity has been established with the green hat, it is surprising how productive it can be.

THE BLUE HAT

Think 'blue sky' and overview. The blue hat is like the conductor of the orchestra. The role of the blue hat is to organise the other hats and to organise the thinking.

The blue hat is to do with process control.

At the beginning of the discussion the blue hat has two main functions. The first of these is defining the focus and purpose.

What are we here for? What are we thinking about? What is the end goal?

The blue hat at the beginning defines the focus. There may be a consideration of alternative focuses or even sub-focuses. Everyone can take part in this discussion with suggestions and opinions. In the end the chairman of the session makes the decision.

The blue hat's second function at the beginning is to lay out the sequence of hats for the session. Again this can be a matter for discussion.

What sequence of hats are we going to use?

During the discussion itself the blue hat has largely a control function. For example:

We are in the yellow hat right now, your remark is rather black hat.'

Under the red hat you just express your feelings, you do not give the reasons behind the feelings.

This is green hat time. We need some new ideas.

The blue hat can also adjust the sequence of hats that has been pre-set. For example, if the red hat shows that most people dislike the idea then the black hat can be placed next to allow people to explain their dislike. So small changes in the sequence are made under the blue hat.

At the end the blue hat has an important function. The blue hat puts together the outcome, the summary, the conclusion and the design. What have we achieved?

If nothing has been achieved then the reason for this can be put forward: 'We need more information in this area.' Or: 'There is a lack of suggestions as to ways out of this mess.'

The blue hat also lays out the next step at the end. This next step could take the form of more thinking or of action. If additional information is needed then ways of getting this new information are decided upon.

The blue hat at the beginning and the blue hat at the end are like two bookends that bracket the thinking. What are we here for? What have we achieved?

Although the blue hat welcomes discussion and suggestions, the final decision is made by the chairman, facilitator or leader of the group.

USE OF THE HATS

The hats provide a strong and neutral symbol of requesting a type of thinking.

‘That’s great black hat thinking, now let’s have some yellow hat on this.’

‘Give me your red hat.’

‘What is the white hat here?’

Such requests could indeed be expressed in ordinary language but the artificiality of the six hats provides a stronger code.

‘Some green hat, please’ is stronger than just asking for more creative thinking.

‘What is your red hat here?’ is more powerful than asking someone to express their feelings – which they are not used to doing.

So the hats can be used individually as a code requesting a specific type of thinking.

The hats can also be used as a pre-set sequence for exploring a subject. The sequence will vary according to the purpose of the thinking: exploration; problem solving; creative thinking; conflict resolution; design. For each of these situations the sequence will vary.

In ordinary conversation the hats are mainly used individually. For those who want full training in the use of the hats for organisational and business purposes, this can be arranged (see www.aptt.com or fax UK +44 (0) 207602 1779).

BENEFITS

The hats provide an alternative to argument. The hats allow joint exploration of a subject. The hats require each individual fully to explore a subject rather than just to make and defend a case. The hats provide a quick method of switching thinking. The hats provide a means to request a particular type of thinking. The hats replace the ego and aggression of argument with the challenge thoroughly to explore a subject. The hats get the best out of people.

Meeting times can be reduced to one fifth or even less, using the hats. The hats are easy to learn and to use. The hats are in use with four-year-olds and with senior executives. It is no longer necessary to use argument simply because there is no other method of discussion.

PARALLEL THINKING – THE SIX HATS

SUMMARY

- 1 In traditional argument each side prepares a case and then seeks to defend that case and to attack the other case. Actual exploration of the subject is limited.
- 2 Parallel thinking replaces the battle of argument with a joint exploration of the subject as all parties think ‘in parallel’ at any moment.
- 3 The direction of thinking is indicated by six coloured hats, each of which indicates a mode of thinking. At any moment everyone is ‘wearing’ the same colour of hat. That is what is meant by ‘parallel thinking’.
- 4 The white hat indicates a focus on information. What do we have? What do we need? How are we going to get the information we need?
- 5 The red hat gives full permission for the expression of feelings, emotions and intuition without any need to give the reasons behind the feelings.
- 6 The black hat is for ‘caution’ and the focus is on faults, weaknesses, what might go wrong and why something does not ‘fit’.
- 7 With the yellow hat the focus is on values, benefits and how something can be done.
- 8 The green hat sets aside time, space and expectation for creative effort. Under the green hat everyone is expected to make such an effort.