Parallel Thinking

Idea In Short

Most meetings run as debates in which one person makes a claim and another attacks it. Edward de Bono argued that this argument system explains what is but rarely creates what could be. His alternative, parallel thinking, asks everyone in a group to explore the same aspect of a problem at the same time, such as facts, feelings, risks, benefits, or new ideas. The Six Thinking Hats method gives each direction a colored hat and a time slot. Practitioners report shorter and more productive meetings, although the evidence is mostly anecdotal. Try it in your next decision meeting by agreeing on the order of hats before anyone speaks.

Anyone who has sat through a long meeting knows the pattern. One person proposes, another objects, and the discussion becomes a contest in which the aim is to win. Good ideas die because their owners cannot defend them quickly, and weak ideas survive because their owners argue well. Parallel thinking offers a different structure. This article explains the idea, describes the Six Thinking Hats method, reports what practitioners say about it, and shows how to apply it with care.

The problem with argument

Atlassian's guide to the Six Thinking Hats summarizes de Bono's view of Western thinking. He asserts that it rests on an argument system in which one person makes a statement and another challenges it. The guide explains that de Bono proposed parallel thinking as an alternative, and that argument focuses on what is, while parallel thinking looks at what can be.1

The critique has intuitive force. In an argument, each participant takes a position early and then defends it. Time and energy go to attack and defense, and few people explore the underlying problem. Parallel thinking tries to change the structure so that people cooperate in exploring a question before they take sides.

The core idea

In parallel thinking, the whole group looks in the same direction at the same time. De Bono held that the main difficulty of thinking is confusion, which arises when participants gather facts, voice feelings, judge proposals, and invent alternatives in the same breath. The method separates these activities and gives each its own time, so that the group can concentrate its collective attention on one kind of contribution before moving to the next.

A practitioner's account on a software engineering blog expresses the benefit simply. After attending a conference session on the technique, the author wrote that point and counterpoint often caused people to shut down and keep their good ideas to themselves, whereas meetings that use parallel thinking are often shorter and more productive.2 The claim is anecdotal, but it matches the logic of the method.

The six hats

De Bono's best-known tool assigns each direction of thought a colored hat. The white hat covers facts and information. The red hat covers feelings and intuition. The black hat covers caution and risk. The yellow hat covers benefits and value. The green hat covers new ideas and alternatives. The blue hat manages the process and summarizes.

A health service library guide explains the rule that gives the method its force: all participants put on the same colored hat at the same time, and everyone is expected to participate equally, which is what de Bono calls thinking together.3 The shared hat removes the tension between roles. Nobody is the permanent critic, because everyone wears the black hat when the group considers risks.

Flexible use

The hats do not require a ceremony. A blog summary of the method points out that you do not need six people in every meeting and that the hats can be used singly to request a type of thinking.4 A chair can ask for the yellow hat when a proposal has met only objections, or ask for the white hat when opinions are running ahead of facts.

An individual can also use the hats alone. Before a difficult email or a major decision, a person can list facts, feelings, risks, benefits, and alternatives in turn. The same structure

that prevents a group from tangling its thoughts can prevent a single mind from doing the same.

What the publisher says

The publisher's page for the book calls it a bestselling guide to running better meetings and making faster decisions and says that large organizations, including IBM, Siemens, and NASA, have used the method.5 A blogger at an analyst firm likewise says the book can change the way you manage meetings and make collaborative decisions.6

These statements come from a publisher and a fan, and they do not amount to controlled evidence. Leaders should draw two conclusions. The method has attracted wide use, which suggests that people find it practical. And its benefits remain largely unmeasured, so a team should test the method on its own meetings.

A sample sequence

A leadership team can run a sequence for a major proposal:

1. Blue hat: state the decision, the goal, and the order of hats
2. White hat: list the facts and the information still missing
3. Yellow hat: explore the benefits and conditions for success
4. Black hat: examine the risks, weaknesses, and obstacles
5. Green hat: generate alternatives and ways to improve the proposal
6. Red hat: share gut reactions, briefly and without justification
7. Blue hat: summarize and decide the next action

Each hat gets a fixed time, usually five to ten minutes, and the facilitator announces the change of hat clearly so that participants can adjust their contributions accordingly. A team that has practiced the sequence can compress it, while a newer team should keep the full structure until the vocabulary feels natural to everyone in the room. The facilitator keeps people in the current hat and notes comments that belong elsewhere on a visible board. Comments parked on the board return in the phase where they fit, so nothing is lost. Teams may reorder the hats to suit the decision, for example by opening with the green hat when the goal is invention.

Why separation works

The central claim of the method is that separating modes of thinking improves the quality of each mode. When criticism and invention occur together, criticism usually wins, because objections are easier to produce than alternatives and because people instinctively protect themselves from the embarrassment of an unsuccessful suggestion. Assigning invention to its own period makes imperfect ideas acceptable, and assigning caution to its own period gives risk analysis the full attention of the group instead of leaving it to a lone skeptic.

A second benefit concerns status. In ordinary debate, senior people tend to speak first and others tend to align with them, whereas a shared hat invites every participant to contribute under the same instruction. Facilitators can strengthen the effect by asking junior members to speak before senior ones within each phase, and by recording contributions on a visible board so that ideas separate from the people who proposed them. These practices rest on the logic of the method and on general knowledge about group behavior, and teams should still verify that they work in their own context.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a company considering the acquisition of a small competitor. In the white hat phase, the team finds that it lacks reliable data on the target's customer retention and agrees to request it. The yellow hat phase lists benefits: access to a new region, complementary products, and shared technology. The black hat phase identifies integration risk, cultural differences, and debt.

In the green hat phase, someone proposes a partnership with an option to acquire later, and another suggests acquiring only one product line. The red hat phase reveals that several members feel uneasy about the culture clash, a feeling that the earlier phases had not exposed. The final blue hat summary sets a plan to gather the missing data and to explore the partnership. A debate might have ended with a vote on the original proposal.

Pitfalls

The method can fail in familiar ways. Teams may rush through the hats as a ritual, with no real effort in each. Facilitators may use the black hat to dismiss a proposal that they dislike. Some groups may feel that the structure suppresses honest disagreement, which should

find a place in the black and red hat phases.

Guard against these problems by explaining the purpose, by timing each phase, and by reviewing the meeting afterward. Ask participants whether they felt heard, whether the group reached a better decision than usual, and what would improve the next session. Over time, the answers show whether parallel thinking suits the team.

- 1Six Thinking Hats: what is it and where did it come from?
- 2Parallel thinking with Six Thinking Hats
- 3Six thinking hats
- 4Think better with Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats
- 5Six Thinking Hats
- 6The Six Thinking Hats

Summary

Parallel thinking replaces adversarial debate with coordinated exploration. By asking the whole group to look in one direction at a time, the method separates facts from feelings, caution from optimism, and idea generation from judgment. The Six Thinking Hats give the directions names that people remember and that facilitators can call on without causing offense. The approach has avid users in business and health care, and its sources are largely practitioner accounts and the claims of its author's publisher, so leaders should measure its effect in their own teams. Choose one upcoming decision, plan a hat sequence, and compare the meeting with your usual format.