



About Thinking

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Thinking outside the box is touted these days as a means of being creative or stretching the status quo. Yet there is a tremendous need for thinking inside the box in our enterprises. Farm Equipment Companies think inside a box, Caterers think inside a box. Microsoft and Walmart think inside the box. Thinking inside the box is critical for the financial bottom line. Boxes are invisible until we look for them. Mark Chussil likens a box as a frame, a paradigm, a habit, a perspective, a self-imposed set of limits. A box is context and interpretation.

I was recently asked by a local nonprofit to help them understand how strategic planning could be used as a tool for

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Tip of the Month



Question: What can I do to help with employee retention?

Answer:

Most companies today recognize the value of attracting and retaining a strong, competent workforce. But most also don't fully appreciate how they can improve retention rates.

When surveyed, employees indicate their top reasons for leaving a position are:

- Not getting along with their direct supervisor.
- Desire for more money.

- Need for better work/life balance.
 - Lack of career growth, challenging assignments.
- Note that three of the four reasons are non-financial. Employers can do much to address these issues, but unfortunately they often only pay lip service to significantly enhancing the employee experience.

So, what's an enlightened employer to do?

1. Actively demonstrate that you value the unique needs of each employee

- Publicly recognize outstanding performance and employee achievements.
- Teach supervisors (including yourself) how to be good coaches and managers.
- Provide ongoing training on issues such as handling conflict, delivering difficult messages and conducting effective performance discussions.
- Tailor your HR and benefit programs to your workforce (flexible work schedules, choices in health plan options, etc.)

managing their organization. There are many tools organizations can use to be strategic about planning for a successful future. The “**Getting everyone on the same Page**” tool may be a planning tool an enterprise could use to focus efforts –or think about a “box” within your business.

This strategic planning tool is simple, it lends itself to thoughtful agility. Ask a small group to think seriously about a” box” in the company. Something that has been rolling around in your mind but you can’t figure out how to move. Charge the small group to create a vision statement, and to come up with a “Page” of a bold new vision and a list of action plans to move that real life challenge or opportunity creatively, thoughtfully and swiftly forward. The “**Getting everyone on the same Page**” tool is a strategic thinking or planning device.

A company attempting to be creative and develop ideas that address pressing issues and opportunities may want to incorporate Edward DeBono’s ‘**Six Thinking Hats**’ method to guide participants in managing the confusion intense thinking creates. The Six Thinking Hats creates a common sign language for thinking through issues. It prevents someone having to become the champion of their idea or debating the “rightness” of their perspective rather than really participating in thinking creatively through the issues. Below is a very brief idea of how parallel thinking works.

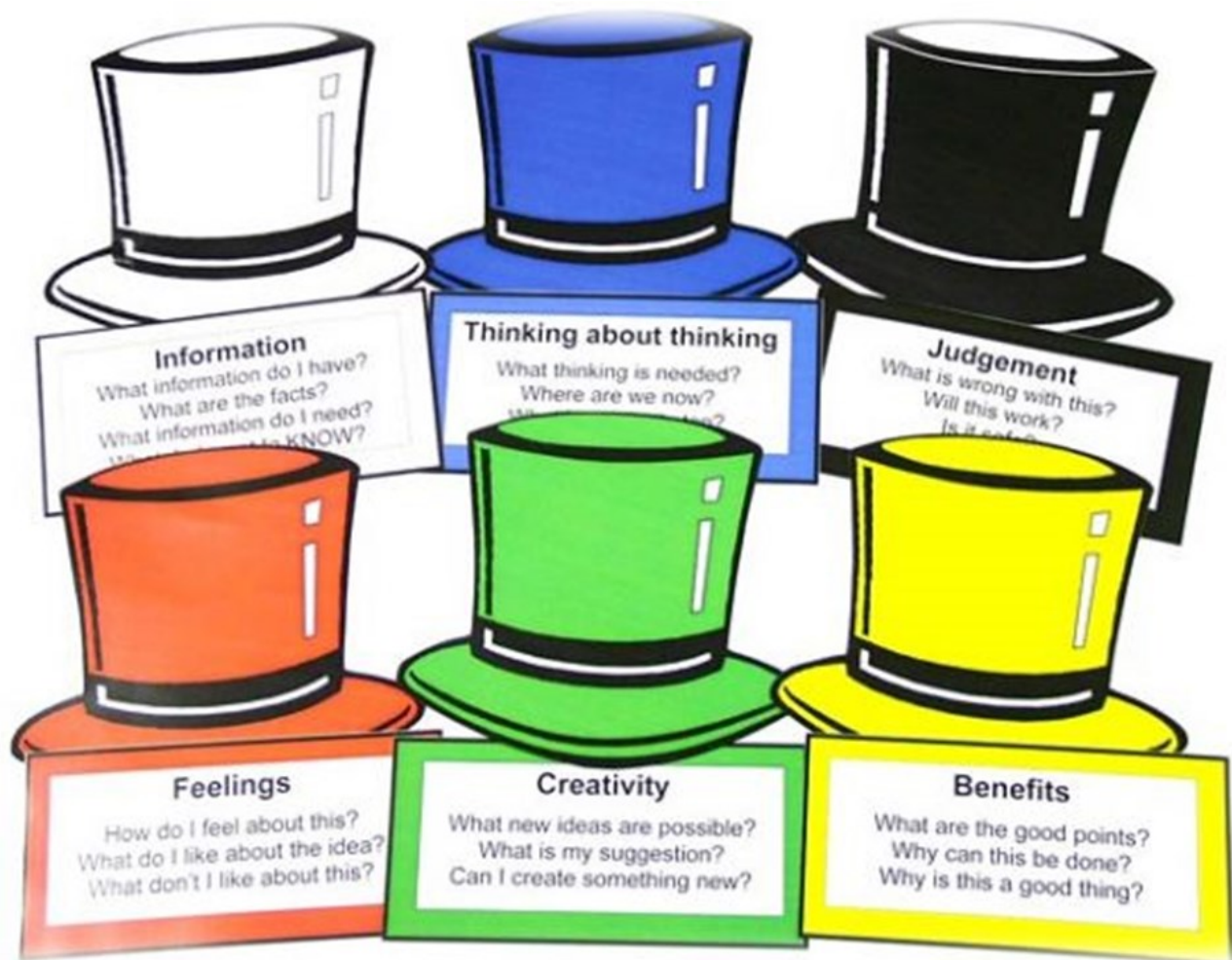
- **White Hat** focuses on available data (facts and figures) while remaining neutral. Participants are encouraged to review existing information, search for gaps in knowledge, analyze past trends, and extrapolate key learnings from historical data.
- **Red Hat** uses intuition, gut reaction, and robust emotion. Encourages participants to think about how other people will react emotionally and try to understand the responses of people who do not fully know your reasoning. Participants do not need to explain or justify individual expressions of feelings.
- **Black Hat** is the basis of logical, critical thinking offering careful, cautious, and defensive insights. Try to see what is wrong; why it might not work; what are the dangers, problems, and obstacles; what are the deficiencies in the thinking process. It allows you to eliminate the negatives, alter plans, or prepare contingency plans to counter any problems.
- **Yellow Hat** is a deliberate search for the positive (optimistic viewpoint) through exploration and speculation defining the benefits of the decision and the value in it. Yellow Hat thinking is constructive blending of “curiosity, pleasure, greed, and the desire to make things happen,” enhancing the proposal



by generating alternative ideas “based on experience, available information, logical deduction, hints, trends, guesses, and hopes.”

- **Green Hat** stands for energy and creativity. This is where you generate new, innovative ideas and develop creative solutions to a problem. It is a freewheeling way of thinking in which there is little criticism of ideas, and “movement” is made using provocation to move “forward with an idea or from an idea” seeking alternative solutions. Green Hat thinking must involve shaping the idea for the user or “buyer.”
- **Blue Hat** is process control “thinking about thinking.” This is the hat worn by people chairing or facilitating the session. Blue Hat may be used at the beginning of the session to set the agenda or the sequence for using the “hats” and at the end of the session when seeking a summary and next steps. Blue Hat focuses on questioning (fishing and shooting and provides the structure for use of other hats and other thinking/problem-solving tools).

If Edward DeBono’s Thinking Hats method intrigues you, he lists the types of questions you ponder in each of the types of thinking in his book, Six Thinking Hats.



Your success in business depends on how well you think. Agility in business is much in demand. It doesn't, or at least shouldn't, merely mean hair-trigger reflexes. Something happened! Do something, quickly! Agility means doing something smart and quickly. Below are some get-smart-fast methods Mark Chussil shares in his June article for the Harvard Business Review. He uses these while war-gaming and simulating Fortune 500 companies. Each of them involves thinking through "boxes."

- **Role-play your competition.** Prior to a war game, a company believed its planned price cut would work because its competitor couldn't afford to match it. It changed its mind when its own people, role-playing the competitor, discovered they couldn't afford not to match the price cut.
- **Reverse the labels.** You can get an extra kick out of SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis. When you've completed the lists in each category, reverse the labels. See how thinking grows when strengths become weaknesses (and vice versa) and opportunities become threats (and vice versa).
- **Resist the urge to converge.** A company faced several competitors, restive customers, and government regulations in flux. In a 15-minute exercise we determined there were millions of possible scenarios ahead. That dispelled the notion that they could plan for "the" future.
- **Assume the presence of intelligent life.** People often say "they were stupid to do X" when they see X led to an unhappy outcome. I ask "why would a smart person do X?" I don't mean that the person was necessarily smart, or that I agree with them; but it's dangerous to assume bad outcomes meant that decision-makers were stupid. They might know something you don't.

You can choose your boxes and can even switch from one box to another. They represent the things that make up your enterprise. Getting on the same page and managing thinking about your boxes may be tools to focus the attention they need to improve your enterprise's bottom line.

"There is always a real box that you should stay inside of. The laws of physics still apply. But this real box can change with new trends and technologies.

Yesterday's real box is usually different from today's real box. The key is to be able to separate today's real box from the imaginary one. Yes, by all means think outside the imaginary box that imposes artificial constraints on your achievements. But stay inside the real box that is defined by your market and your capacity to satisfy your customers – if you want to win."

... Dileep Rao for Forbes, 2/03/2014