

DONALD THOMPSON

ALL HATS ON DECK:

IMPLEMENTING A 360° DECISION FRAMEWORK
FOR IDEAS,
CHALLENGES
AND OPPORTUNITIES



All Hats On Deck:

Implementing A 360° Decision Framework
For Ideas, Challenges And Opportunities

By
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DEDICATION

My mentor, Grant Williard, introduced me to this book when I was a young professional looking to partner with and lead people that were different than me - then, technologists and engineers. Edward de Bono's *Six Thinking Hats* was a framework I mastered in order to ask better questions, lead better meetings and create collaborative environments to accelerate goal achievement.

Over the years, I have used this methodology in multiple organizations, one on one consulting relationships and advisory board service where we were all hustling to do something great together.

I wrote this book to tell the stories and share the use cases of how I implemented this strategy to help other people win.

This book is dedicated to every person who partnered with me along my journey and to the dream chasers looking for an easy to understand framework to become better communicators and leaders of tomorrow.

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Introduction

In collaboration with many colleagues, I've achieved great success as a technology entrepreneur, angel investor, business strategist, and advisor to other successful CEOs. For me, success is all about having a foundation of confidence.

It takes a lot of confidence to start a business or invest in one. It also takes a lot of confidence to get up every day and face multiple challenges coming at you from every direction (sometimes simultaneously), whether you're running a company or a business unit.

Some of us are born with greater measures of confidence than others, but I believe you can acquire the confidence you need to succeed. During my career, I have acquired the confidence I've needed in multiple ways:

1. Lean on trusted, dialed-in colleagues who steer you in the right direction.
2. Spend time with top performers, see how to achieve success through their eyes.
3. Seek mentors, people who have been where you want to go.
4. Read, and then read some more to get the cutting-edge knowledge that only thought leaders can provide.

Let's talk about that last point. I've been a voracious reader throughout my career, but I can honestly say few books have affected me like Edward de Bono's *Six Thinking Hats*. This system of parallel thinking that allows its users to look at obstacles, challenges and questions from a variety of perspectives has had a profound effect on my career and those who work with me.

Why? The *Six Thinking Hats* is my framework of choice for evaluating opportunities, addressing problems and running meetings effectively and efficiently. Each hat in the system represents a way of thinking about any subject:



For me, leadership is about growth. When you're viewed as a successful leader, it's because you have achieved growth in three forms: self, team, and organization. To

lead with authenticity, you must grow as an individual, while supporting managers and producers, and moving your organization forward.

The enduring effectiveness of de Bono's *Six Thinking Hats* is that it has demonstrably equipped me, my CEOs, and my teams to go—and stay—where successful people go. Where is that place? It's the place where risk lies, waiting to betray the unarmed, those who are not alert and ready. To build a business, you need people who “run to the fire,” whether that fire is a slumping sales forecast, a supply chain malfunction, or a really unhappy customer.

During my career, I've built teams full of elite performers. The people I work with have big goals, and they must mitigate and manage a lot of risks so that they can attack issues and create opportunities. They use the *Six Thinking Hats* methodology to strip down business challenges so that they can correctly assess not only risk, but features, benefits, gaps, and more. None of this happens in a vacuum, either.

The advantage of the *Six Thinking Hats* is that it equips us not just to perform in good times—laid-back, long-term strategy sessions—but in situations exacerbated by duress. When people are under pressure, they often make bad decisions that both compound the pressure and lead to bad results. When you have a reliable decision-making framework, like the *Six Thinking Hats*, you can not only run to the fire, you can deal with it without getting burned.

So, I have a lot to be thankful for when I think of my success. There are those trusted colleagues, people in whom I have confided when the going gets tough, who pick me up and set me going to achieving results. There are those top performers who have agreed to spend time with me and share the insights that have unlocked problems I've faced. There are the mentors, who listened to my goals and how I thought I could reach them and reacted by sharing tried-and-true paths for success and mapped potential pitfalls for me to avoid. Finally, there are the thought leaders, like Edward de Bono, who have shaped my thinking as they lead the business world through paradigm shifts in strategy.

I believe in paying these gifts forward. The purpose of this book is to show you how the *Six Thinking Hats* transcends industry, geography, culture, and all the aspects of business that normally have us thinking we're sailing alone. I hope you enjoy it, and I hope this work serves its purpose, to give you a jump-start to greater success as an individual performer, leader, and as an organization.

One final note about the author: I don't use what I learn from things like the *Six Thinking Hats* because it's cute or makes me look smarter. I use it because it helps me win. If you're reading this, there's something in you that's craving a way to not only be more productive but to get that competitive edge you need to win. That

little extra something, for me (and I know it can be for you, too) is the application of the *Six Thinking Hats* in your personal and professional lives.

Leveraging the Six Thinking Hats



Running a business—whether you’re at the top as part of the leadership team, managing a business unit, or performing as a key player—takes a commitment to setting and achieving goals. Some of your goals may be big—moving from the middle of the pack to first in revenue share in your industry—while others may be smaller in nature, such as finding five to ten percent to trim from your budget to get more fiscally lean in a new year.

Regardless, running a business is basically a giant collection of goals of all sizes and how you go about achieving them. I like to think of certain goals as universal, transcending industries and applicable to for-profit, nonprofit, and government organizations.

As you can imagine, I’ve been a part of dozens of goal-setting teams and initiatives through the years. In my capacity as a business strategist, I typically instruct leadership and management teams, as well as individual performers, to think about their goals as internal and external.

Internally, companies need to accomplish three objectives to improve:

- Lead
- Execute
- Solve problems

Externally, it’s all about engaging with your core constituencies:

- For-profits=customer and employees
- Nonprofits=donors and clients
- Universities=students and alumni
- Associations=members and the public

Once you and your team master the basic blocking and tackling of business, whether it’s internal or external activities, there comes a time when you’ve arrived at next-level strategies.

In order to take your organization to higher levels of performance, you’ll need to make even better-informed decisions in a host of areas.

These decisions include growing teams, including both performers and levels of management and accountability across an organization. Growth doesn't stop at just naming and filling roles, however. You'll need your leaders to replicate themselves, thus leaving much of their time spent building new leaders for the company.

The bigger you get, the more competitive your space will be, whether you're a nonprofit or university competing for donor dollars with larger organizations, or if you have an emerging technology disrupting the status quo (with up-and-comers wanting to knock you off as well).

You'll need to remain vigilant with keeping decision points—objectives—aligned with your larger goals. Those goals (again, internal and external in focus), feed your growth directly, whether you measure growth in profit or impact.

To add a final layer of complexity to running a business, you'll need to appreciate the difference between perception and reality. Often, you're doing what you need to do, but people don't know it. Communications add a special component to the mix.

Communication comes into play whenever there are gaps of understanding, or whenever you're launching something new (which in and of itself, is gap-filling in nature). So, if you've got a new employee engagement initiative that has launched, but several of your people haven't heard about it, that's obviously a communications problem.

On a larger scale, if you're launching a new product or service, or program or fundraising campaign, you'll have to be great at communications to spread the word and bring those customers/members/alumni back home to you with their minds and wallets open to what you're offering.

All of these goals, objectives, decisions, and communication points are in front of you if you're an executive or manager, or they await you. It's really quite dizzying when you stop to think about how taxing running an organization, or even just a part of it, can be on the mind. This is precisely why the *Six Thinking Hats*, in a time where technology has doubled down on the speed of business opportunity and pitfalls, is more relevant than ever.

Quite simply, the layers and layers of decision-making, whether it's setting a goal for your organization or listing objectives that align with those goals, beg for a communication framework that takes what would otherwise be chaos and has it all make some kind of sense. You need to get things done quickly AND effectively, with no compromise either way. Thus, you need an organized way of thinking that rids decision-making of egos and arguments, paving the way for a more holistic, yet even more efficient discussion.

With the *Six Thinking Hats* methodology, I can effectively communicate on multiple levels with my teams in multiple situations, such as setting a course, getting the best ideas out of people, and putting my organization in a position to succeed. And better yet, when you learn this methodology, you can teach others to replicate it, thus expediting the “leaders building leaders” dynamic that every company needs, as you’ll have a group of people who know how to speak the same language. This incredible communication tool empowers business leaders to drive conversations in a focused manner, demanding that the team discuss all aspects of an idea, project, or problem while limiting the risk of hurt feelings and keeping meetings on track.

The rest of this book is dedicated to use cases so that you’ll see how the *Six Thinking Hats* methodology plays out in a variety of scenarios. It’s important to understand the hats and what they stand for, and you need to know some ground rules. For this understanding, I borrow liberally from Dr. Edward de Bono, author of the original *Six Thinking Hats*.



Let’s start with the White hat. According to de Bono, the white hat is all about facts and figures. When you use white hat thinking, your greatest concern should be objectivity for anything that goes into the hopper for consideration.



Next, there’s the Red hat. With red hat thinking (and its connotations of rage and feeling), you get emotion. Some people have a hard time seeing the place for red hat thinking in a business meeting. I don’t. Red hat thinking tells you where the passion is for ideas in your organization, and passion goes a long way to making a concept successful.



The Black hat is perhaps the easiest one to guess. When you deploy black hat thinking, you veer to the negative, to risk, to why things might not work. Many people struggle with black hat thinking, but I love it. When you use your black hat, you often know exactly where to put some extra effort or special brainpower on your team, to ensure that your project is a success. Black hat thinking also helps you avoid some of your biggest potential failures (also not a bad thing!).



The Yellow hat is fun. Sunny and positive, yellow hat thinking helps you visualize a utopian vision for the future, whether you're introducing new products or trying to win new customers. It's important to visualize success, so yellow hat thinking offers some nice context to decision frameworks.



I use the Green hat often. Often in many companies, the idea generators are exalted (and rightfully so) for coming up with the "next big thing" or a succession of winning "small things." When you unleash green hat thinking on an entire group, this creativity hat empowers everyone to achieve that exalted status, and it fuels incredible collaboration.



Finally, there's the Blue hat, which many would argue makes the whole *Six Thinking Hats* methodology hum. Blue is all about control and process, whether you're putting up guardrails for an actual brainstorming or visioning session, or you're looking to lay out a framework within each of the other hats will play a role in filling in the gaps of knowledge and understanding.

Now, let's look at the ground rules.

Rule #1: It's important to have your people learn the attributes associated with each hat, so that they automatically fall into that thinking mode without trying too hard. For example, you should never say, "Tell me your feelings about our sales deficit." Instead, say, "We need a dose of red hat thinking to get us going on sales."

Rule #2: It's up to you to devise your own system for using the hats, which may loosely dictate how your meetings cover each of the hats' areas. Dr. de Bono suggests starting with a blue hat perspective, which demands a process to be put in place before filling in with facts, feelings, and more, and then closing with blue hat thinking, so that your group has a process ironed out for post-meeting action. I've found that this is good advice in many circumstances, but don't be too rigid. There will be times where you may have all the facts (white hat) about a situation, be well along your process (blue hat) journey, and you still need some yellow (benefits) hat thinking along with an equal measure of black (caution) hat thoughts.

Rule #3: Request that everyone in your team use each of the hats. I've heard some companies that have been exposed to the *Six Thinking Hats*, tell me, "Lisa is a black hat thinker, but Brian is a yellow hat guy." That's NOT what you want. The whole purpose of this methodology is to get people thinking about a challenge from

different perspectives, not just the one that fits their personality or whatever bias they brought into the conference room. When you challenge your team to rotate and give thoughts from each perspective, it pushes people out of their comfort zone and encourages them to broaden their thinking by contributing in each area (your positive types will enjoy the freedom to criticize when it black hat time rolls around—trust me!).

And here's my own fourth rule.

Rule #4: Run to the fire! From the safety of the *Six Thinking Hats* process, you and your team need to *believe* you can accomplish anything. I'm here to tell you, that if you have the right combination of talent, motivation, and moxie, your team *can* accomplish anything. So, don't just use the *Six Thinking Hats* for goal-setting and decision-making that you deem safe, like making a new sales goal. Use it when the stakes are high, when you're making a bigtime hire, or you're determining a make-or-break strategy under duress. No matter the level of the decision, the *Six Thinking Hats* won't let you down.

Let's continue to build your understanding of the effectiveness and efficiency of the *Six Thinking Hats* by outlining several scenarios you might see when running an organization.

Walk Before You Run

A couple of years ago, I invested in a digital marketing agency where I saw a lot of open opportunities. From my conversations with the CEO, I knew that he had something special, a rare combination of technical expertise, work ethic, and charisma. Joining his leadership team as a business strategist, I wanted to do everything I possibly could to help him grow his agency to its fullest potential.

During the first year, I advised the CEO, Brian, as he took a small, two-man concept into a thriving team of more than a dozen marketing professionals. In the second year, I knew that we had the critical mass of loyal customers, a well-built team, and a solid set of offerings, all of which positioned Walk West to approach its growth through a merger or acquisition.

As Brian and I looked at potential partners for a merger, we kept coming back to another, similarly-sized local company that was everything we were not. We knew how to optimize digital for companies (interactive sites, banner advertising, AdWords, you name it), while Greenroom Communications knew the content, especially video. Where Walk West had established an envied roster of local and regional clients, Greenroom had a national presence, and along with that a client roster of household names. And while our talent featured some of the best people you could find for your “engine room” --web strategists, designers, developers, and the like, Greenroom was a collection of former media personalities who had instant credibility, not only in front of the camera, but in boardrooms across America as they pitched their work.

Brian and I began to explore the possibility of a merger through application of *Six Thinking Hats* methodology, gathering the Walk West leadership team to gather as many intelligent, informed opinions as efficiently as possible.

Here’s a breakdown of how we worked through the Six Thinking Hats.

Yellow: First, we ran through the positive reasons to move through a purchase transaction with Greenroom. We looked at ourselves first, and we determined that Walk West was a digital agency gaining lots of traction with our client base and marketplace momentum. Yet, something was missing, and that something was world-class video production on par with our digital capabilities otherwise. We needed video production, along with compelling creative content delivered specifically in that medium, as market research has shown much higher levels of consumer engagement with video content on social media (10 times more likely to



share than static content), higher click-through rates on email marketing, (2x more than static content) and longer retention (nearly two-thirds of viewers watch more than three-quarters of a video they see).

Greenroom Communications had the content and the ability to promote it on the big stage with a team of expert storytellers, former broadcast media personalities, social media sensations, and documentary filmmakers. Their credibility in the market was higher than ever, and through the talented team at Greenroom, we knew we could be dominant in spaces like YouTube and Vimeo.

The positives were there for us, but we still needed to see through our thinking with the other hats.



White: We needed to look at the facts of the situation as well, to know exactly what we were doing (or not) with Greenroom. We knew from our experience in running digital marketing agencies, that by combining these two businesses, you'd then have the ability to grow by 30-40 percent in short order. Walk West desired to be a truly full-service digital marketing agency, and our big gap in achieving that goal was the twin capabilities of video production and compelling content via that same medium.

We saw that Greenroom--right here in our same Raleigh/Durham market--had established itself in these two areas with high-end customers with household names, companies like Target and H&R Block. Having these types of customers exposed to Walk West's remaining portfolio of services, with Greenroom as the entry point, offered us an open sky of opportunity to exceed that 30-40 percent growth target.

The facts looked good for us, yet there was still more work to do.



Green: As we worked through the hats, we came to the green hat, representing creativity. We were thrilled by the possibilities of deploying Greenroom's formidable production talents not only in the service of our clients but also to develop our own thought leadership in the digital space through the video medium.

We'd be able to create much more compelling content through Greenroom's capabilities, appealing to prospects who are more visual in nature. Instead of just doing advertising for clients, we could tell stories that would advance their brands.

The creative fit here, for a merger of Walk West and Greenroom Communications, was quite obvious, and the possibilities for growth in this area of our business were exponential.



Black: Virtually any decision has potential negatives or risk factors, and you must address these challenges head-on. In this case, Greenroom was a 10-person firm that was used to being a small company and having decision-making autonomy. We asked ourselves, how would the Greenroom folks react to being part of a larger team?

Would they embrace selling a new, wider portfolio of services outside of what the ones to which they were accustomed? Would the team at Greenroom be excited about the new changes, and a change of leadership structure?

And perhaps the biggest of all questions: would the cultures of the two companies mesh, so that 1+1=11? After all, the only reason for merging with or acquiring other companies is to achieve exponential growth and do it more quickly. Blue hat: building out the valuation of the firm—how much, when, rolling out messaging to employees, customers, other stakeholders. Training staff to sell the other's offerings.

For these questions, we found our answers by being empathetic and by engaging with the principles of Greenroom to ensure their comfort with what the future held.



Red: Mergers are hard, and you can't avoid your emotions. Economic and emotional reality has to be dealt with when you're looking at fundamentally changing your DNA and someone else's by joining forces, and the economic and emotional realities can't really be bifurcated. Every entrepreneur has a false sense of what the company

is worth, and everyone worries about how their employees will be treated when they give up their independence.

And not all the emotions are negative. With Walk West and Greenroom, we had folks wondering aloud about valuations, in addition to being concerned with employee well-being. In this case, we had to also properly check our excitement and enthusiasm, to have the right measure of caution in order to execute this marriage properly.

The lesson here is that your emotions, when properly accounted for and compartmentalized within the greater context of considerations, can be an asset to your thinking.



Blue: Blue is for the process, and with any merger or acquisition there's a large process - executing the transaction - fueled by many smaller processes. We had to do our due diligence with our respective companies and build out a fair valuation of Greenroom to make this game-changing unification happen.

Then, the two companies would need a process for taking care of all the affected constituents, conversations and messaging with and to employees, customers, and other stakeholders like our friends, families, and professionals who refer us business. And then, of course, at consummation, we would need our two teams moving forward as one, properly trained to sell each other's offerings.

Putting It All Together



With the Walk West/Greenroom Communications merger, which closed in January of 2017, the yellow hat positives and the green hat creative potential far outweighed any red or black hat downside. The beauty of applying *Six Thinking Hats* thinking is that this methodology can distill large, complex, multi-faceted business challenges to their essential elements, providing a much clearer lens for making a go/no-go decision.

When you're pursuing a strategic transaction, yellow hat positives need to significantly outweigh, in particular, any black hat fiscal downsides. You can't overpay, but you need to position yourself better by adding powerful new capabilities and the new teammates to bring those capabilities to life for yourself and your clients.

In the case of Walk West and Greenroom Communications, we ended up with a well-meshed culture performing on the national stage, an emerging national brand for our digital agency, now replete with end-to-end capabilities for clients.

Buying a business is one of the more difficult decisions to evaluate for C-suite leaders. With a post-M&A failure rate sitting somewhere between 70 and 90 percent depending on the industry, any time you pursue inorganic growth, you're truly putting it all on the line - everything you've worked to build with your own blood, sweat, and tears. Running through the thinking hats has provided Brian and me with the framework we need to run to our own fires, which occur when we're creating something new from two distinct parts. Marketplace opportunities are fraught with risk, and the thinking hats helps us to strip everything down, see where the real potential lies and which pitfalls to avoid.

Becoming an Entrepreneur

I've spent a lot of time in my recent career as an angel investor, business strategist, and leadership coach working with some really great entrepreneurs. Working with those who are bold enough to push their boats out into the world of startups, a wide-open sea full of both opportunity and risk, is incredibly rewarding for me, and it's a constant reminder that these are the people who make society advance, at least from an economic perspective.

Very few of us are entrepreneurs when we get started with our careers, whether we start working out of high school, or right after college, or if we join the military. Thus, we get used to a certain framework, the paradigm of being a worker or a manager in something larger than ourselves, where we're usually not near the top of the ladder. Contrary to popular perception, people arrive at entrepreneurship in their careers from many pathways. In my case, I worked my way into my company's leadership and my mentor, the founder and CEO, ultimately gave me the reins of the company from both a leadership and ownership standpoint.

Others arrive at starting a company through having an idea for a product or service and building a business around it. You see this dynamic with a lot of folks, such as surgeons who think of new types of medical devices to make their jobs—and thus the jobs of other surgeons—easier. I've even met some folks who start doing something “on the side,” as a passion project away from work, and one day they find that the market opens up a big, ongoing opportunity for the things they did previously just for fun or as a creative outlet.

Regardless of the path you may follow to entrepreneurship, there comes a reckoning point. At some point in the future, you have to decide whether or not you want to take the plunge and bet on yourself and your own ideas. This is a big decision, and it deserves a thorough thought process that will yield a solid decision. *Six Thinking Hats*, anyone?

Here's a hypothetical for deciding whether to start a company using this tried-and-true methodology:

Yellow: When you're thinking about starting a business, you often see some real positives. Many of my fellow entrepreneurs can be justly accused of having problems with the standard corporate structure—they believe in their own decision-making and are more than happy to be held accountable, receiving the



plaudits and rewards for good ones and taking the criticism and consequences of bad ones.

You need to be able to list a significant number of positives to start a business. In addition to self-belief, you need to be able to clearly articulate a value proposition for your products and/or services that resonate with segments of the marketplace. You need to be positive about not only the short-term prospects for your success but the long-term as well.

As you're moving through yellow hat thinking, you need to make sure you list real positives and not simply list negatives like "I get to quit this job that I hate." Not having that job hatred in your life won't breed success as an entrepreneur.



White: With the white hat, you need to do a cool, sober assessment of the facts. In order to start a business, you need to have several aspects buttoned down from the beginning. In addition to your value proposition, you'll need to think through your ability to deal with both success and failure early on. Do you have the capital, either from your own savings, pre-orders, or investment, to not make money for a length of time (six months, a year) in order to properly develop your offerings and base of customers?

Furthermore, do you have the right people in place to execute on your business plan? Not only do you need a group of people who will form a tight-knit culture, because running an early-stage company is incredibly difficult, but you'll also need a diverse skill set within your team so that you have capable individuals in sales, marketing, finance, and delivery.

This type of fact-based analysis, the numbers of starting and running a business, deserves an unflinching look when you're thinking about launching a business. You'll need to be completely honest about the assets you have to start the business and especially so about any gaps or resources you lack. If you can identify these challenges before you launch, you'll have a better chance of overcoming them later.



Green: When you put on the green hat, you need to think about the creativity needed to start and run a business. Since very few of us are truly the first to market with our ideas for products or services, you'll need to think creatively about what will differentiate you and fuel your sustainability. For example, if you're a working for a large professional services firm and looking at starting your own, how are you going to disrupt your marketplace? Are you going to change the service or pricing model somehow, such as challenging the notion of pricing by the billable hour?

You'll also need to understand and address creatively, the fact that the marketplace can and will change over time. In order to be one step ahead of where the market is

going, your creative juices need to be flowing, from the beginning, with not just your launch ideas, but with the concepts that form your next generation of products and services. If, for example, you're going to start a house cleaning business, you'd better be figuring out how to open up new markets with different offerings once you hit critical mass with single-family homes, such as an apartment or commercial office and building services.

This last point illustrates the potential, where creativity really drives your business. Think creatively about the end—are you launching a lifestyle or growth business? Do you want to simply do what you love to do, for a lifetime, or do you want to build something of marketplace value, where you can ultimately sell and benefit yourself and your family to a much greater degree?

Red: Remember, the red hat is where you check your emotions. Making this decision—I've made it myself and walked many others through the decision-making process of launching a business—is laden with many emotions.

A lot of people rightfully identify fear as an emotion that grips them as they decide on starting a company. Within the *Six Thinking Hats* framework, you can isolate emotions like fear and work through them. Other negative emotions can come into play, like anger. If you find that you're mostly driven by the fact that you're angry about your current situation, that doesn't bode well for your commitment to your ideas.

Conversely, just thinking about running your own business and all the possibilities can give you a kind of artificial high. I've always seen the most successful people as also the most balanced among us. They never get too high, and they never get too low. In other words, they have a high emotional intelligence, because they know how to check through their emotions, and address both the positives and negatives in a deliberate way.

Running with the red hat during your thinking process can help you develop your emotional intelligence in much the same way.



Black: When you're thinking of running your own business, you've got to embrace black hat thinking. You have to soberly assess the risks of any business, and never stop doing so. The hallmark of sound business management is to have an appropriate balance (there's that word again) between business development and risk management. You can't let risk-based thinking dominate, nor can you run roughshod in the marketplace with revenue-only thinking.

When you're contemplating a business launch, it's important to play devil's advocate and identify your weaknesses and potential challenges to sustained

marketplace success. Sometimes, you'll realize that your current ideas don't have what it takes to succeed, and you can work on them until they do. Or, you realize that the competitive landscape isn't quite as risky as you may have thought, and there's a clear path to making it work.



Blue: While you can put these hats on in pretty much any sensible combination, arriving at the blue hat last means it's time to plan and execute according to processes. Talking to many successful entrepreneurs through the years, I've learned that a business's processes are what generate the real, lasting value in a company.

With the Blue Hat, you'll need to map out your sales process, your business development funnel, your marketing strategy, and whether you want to bootstrap the growth of your lifestyle business or execute a plan for taking on external capital investment to fuel more rapid growth. The right answers here are what you decide, and there are processes to implement.

Some of the best entrepreneurs I know have backgrounds in design, whether it's an industrial designer of consumer products, a graphic or web designer, or an engineer used to designing complex things like systems or physical plant facilities. Since these folks live and breathe design, they follow a creative, workmanlike process on all things great and small. They intuitively wear the Blue Hat with ease, and they always seem to have a firm foundation upon which they launch and sustain their companies.

Putting It All Together



When you're walking through the decision framework of starting a business, it's so important to give equal, enthusiastic attention to each of the *Six Thinking Hats*.

You have to acknowledge your emotions but keep them in check as you assess the other areas of your concept. Certainly, as with most decisions, the yellow and green hat outcomes need to outweigh the black hat cautions. The yellow will boost your launch, while the green will sustain your early momentum for future success.

Above all else, perhaps, you'll need to rely heavily on the facts of your situation--read the marketplace, see your differentiating potential, and be honest with yourself about your ability--and those who go along for the ride with you--as well as the capital to both succeed and fail early on. Having all of the facts at hand will also help you map out a business plan and operationalize its components so that you can approach growing your business and the risks associated with its existence with equal attention.

Sometimes, I find myself thinking that everyone should start a business at some point in their lives. There's no greater professional joy than achieving success with your own ideas and collaborating with people you love and trust. And even when you fail, you learn so much, getting stronger for the next stage of both your professional and personal life. But starting a business and running a company isn't for everyone, and not every idea should be taken to the market. Use the *Six Thinking Hats* to test your concepts and your mettle, and you'll gain the directional intelligence you need to make the right call.

Do You Use Email, or Does It Use You?

From time to time, I get opportunities to share my belief in the *Six Thinking Hats* framework during live, in-person workshops. Being a people person, there's nothing like teaching this decision-making concept to otherwise intelligent, capable people and watching in a live setting how they immediately start applying the *Six Thinking Hats* to their own professional situations.

Recently, I held a workshop at Duke University's School of Nursing. When you set foot on the Duke campus, you see excellence everywhere. The school's undergraduate and graduate programs are among the most prestigious and competitive in the country. In fact, at the time of this writing, the School of Nursing is ranked number one in *US News and World Report's* annual listing of nursing schools, specifically for its master's level program in nursing and doctoral program that produces leading nurse practitioners around the country.

Everything and everyone at Duke, from the buildings and labs to the students and faculty, project class and excellence. But my recent trip to the School of Nursing at Duke reminded me that certain issues are so pervasive, that ultimately, we all put our pants on one leg at a time. As I was running this workshop, I asked the participants to nominate scenarios for a walk-through of the *Six Thinking Hats*.

As we went around the room, an idea put forward by one of the leaders there really struck me. "I need to do something about emails," she said. "I feel like how I handle my emails is a detriment to performing my other duties to the best of my ability." Obviously, I encouraged her to run the challenge--what to do about emails hampering her professional achievement--through the *Six Thinking Hats* framework.

You'll see that this process can inform not only the large decisions like corporate mergers and starting a company, but also even the simple challenges we face on a daily basis.



White: As you work through this type of decision, it's clear you need to see the facts first. In our analysis of the perceived email problem, we discovered that our good friend at the Duke School of Nursing was spending a full 25 percent of her time sending and returning emails to her superiors, peers, and subordinates in the chain of command. While this sounds like a high number, we needed more context.

When you're addressing a possible efficiency problem, it's important to see what you're failing to accomplish while something else monopolizes your time. In the case of our Duke leader, the immediacy of almost all of her emails was causing her both heartache and jeopardizing deadlines on projects longer-term in nature, like periodic employee evaluations and ongoing training and certifications she needed to maintain the standard of excellence she had established for herself and was expected of her at an elite organization.



Red: Just the fact that our nursing school manager elevated this rather mundane (on the surface) problem for our discussion was revealing of an emotional component. In this type of decision-making process, the red hat has perhaps a larger role to play for many of us.

Often, when we need to shake up our own orthodoxy and become a better version of ourselves, we need to let our emotions fuel us. In this case, she was angry at the size of the problem--once the facts of how much time the email was taking from her and her long-term goals--and disappointed in herself for letting the scope of the problem creep to a nearly unmanageable level.

I've found through the years that while big decisions need a heavier dose of fact-based sobriety, that these smaller decisions need the motivational force of your emotions. Many people I know who've lost large amounts of weight stared at the facts of their situation (obesity, multiple comorbidities, low quality of life) with nonchalance. They had to get angry or sad enough, or think positively about self-esteem increase, in order to make a real change in their daily routines.



Yellow: As we moved to the yellow hat, we needed to see the positives of making a proactive change to how our leader handled her email, versus the typical, passive way of "un-management" of email--sending and returning as she had the time or as they popped up on her desktop or smartphone.

In this case, we set a goal for reducing her time spent on emails to 10 percent of each day. That would mean spending roughly 45 minutes a day versus approximately three hours. That's a mighty big drop, but I liked the ambition. With another two hours each day, she told us, it would be a no-brainer that she could make steady, near-daily progress on long-term projects like continuing education and training for her team and pay daily attention to the needs of her staff instead of struggling just to complete quarterly performance reviews.

That's the beauty of the Yellow Hat, being able to picture a brighter tomorrow as something to strive for in your work.



Green: Perhaps the hardest work in this scenario was left to the green hat. In some situations, creativity flows easily, but with the more mundane, daily stuff, the very subject matter can make creativity a challenge.

However, we were willing to do the hard work, especially in the controlled environment of the *Six Thinking Hats* framework. First, we suggested time blocking, staggering 15-minute shifts at the beginning of the day, just after lunch, and then in the evening. Then, she decided to flag emails from certain VIPs as those that may need immediate attention. These VIPs could be her own managers, peers with whom she was working on critical projects, or new employees who may be in greater need of on-the-fly mentoring. Finally, she thought she'd tell her colleagues of this initiative to increase her professional output so that they'd respond, in courtesy, with shorter communications and properly flag their emails with appropriate priority levels.



Black: Any time we're letting go of an old habit, especially a rather mindless one, it's easy to be dominated by our own risk aversion when we think of proactively managing the situation instead.

In this scenario, we needed to inform the process with black hat thinking as to risks to any of the components of her plan. Whenever you get into time blocking of a particular task, a couple of things happen. If you're not careful, you're not available for other priorities. And also, you're handcuffing your ability to properly respond to extremely urgent situations.

Our black hat mini-session forced her to address the question: "If I'm checking my emails every three to four hours, is there anything that could fall through that crack of time that would be catastrophic to me, my team, or my organization?" Also, "Am I being too self-serving with this strategy, and in effect foisting my own problem back on people who are trying to communicate with me?"



Blue: With breaking old habits and replacing them with new ones, it's important to remember that Rome wasn't built in a day, nor should you expect to become a different person, with machine-like efficiency, in a day. That's why we need our blue hat for the process.

With our email problem, we proposed a plan of implementing each component one week at a time, so that she could ramp up her new process over the course of a month. During week one, she'd implement time blocking. In week two, she'd make a list of VIPs and adjust her email client to flag their emails as urgent and appear at the top of her inbox, taking care to include her manager, a few key peers, and her recent departmental hire. In week three, after implementing the first two

components successfully, she'd relay her new way of doing business to her teammates.

Finally, at the end of the first month, and each subsequent month thereafter, she'd take a quick look back and see how well she was managing to her new plan for emails and then make necessary adjustments to other aspects of her job to adhere to the plan more closely.

Putting It All Together



Sometimes, we see things most clearly when we take situations that have unnecessarily run out of control, hit the pause button, and bring them back to their proper level of importance and scope. Even the best of us, like our friends at the Duke School of Nursing, can let the “little things” evolve into big issues that adversely impact our progress and achievement professionally.

When you apply the *Six Thinking Hats* to these more microscopic issues, you’ll see the priority weight of the hats change. In this scenario, the facts of the white hat played a huge role in helping our client see not only the amount of time that emails were taking, but more importantly, the time emails took away from very important initiatives and her ability to properly care for the needs of her staff.

I think that when you see something small getting the best of you, it’s well and good to let your emotions get the best of you for a thoughtful period of consideration, since we are often motivated to change by driving ourselves to do better.

In this scenario, you also see how important creativity can be, even when the subject matter is as dry as it gets! When you fuel that green hat creativity with blue hat processes for implementation over time, your chances of creating a new, game-changing set of habits increase exponentially.

Making a Big-Time Hire

It doesn't matter if you're a CEO or a business unit manager, hiring can come with a lot of pressure. Even the best companies that do a great job at hiring people with a great organizational fit can experience some attrition, and those with more traditional hiring methods can experience fallout rates approaching 50 percent.

The bottom line is that all of us in the business of hiring have made enough bad selections that we can be more than a little gun shy when the next big role to fill rolls around. When you're hiring for a critical position, you can take comfort in having a great process for evaluating your candidates in a comprehensive, cohesive manner. For me, that means bringing some *Six Thinking Hats* methodology into play.

I recently invested in a small company looking to go big with my help. Whenever I make these types of investments, I take on a strategist's role at the company, so that I can help mentor the CEO and leadership team where I have already established trust and belief. This particular company needed to fuel its next stage of growth by making a game-changing hire to join its emerging c-suite.

We had just introduced the *Six Thinking Hats* to this team, and we put one of our most intelligent team members, a person quick to adapt to new ways of thinking about business, in charge of the hiring process.

She conducted phone screenings of 30-plus candidates for the position, with a goal of winnowing the field from our nationwide talent search to a manageable handful for final interviews with the CEO.



White: As she began each phone interview, our hiring leader set about filling in the blanks of what she needed, facts-wise, to make a good decision. With white hat thinking, she was able to learn some of the basics to establish a nice baseline among all the candidates with multiple attribute areas like salary history and requirements, experience, qualifications, educational background, and more. When you deploy *Six Thinking Hats* methodology, you're always able to expand your definitions of each of the drill-down areas you pursue. In this process, she was able to document some "extras," such as did the candidate do his or her research on the company and role, had they done things like reach out to the CEO on

LinkedIn, and other little things that help differentiate candidates and give you the separation you need to make a great hire.

It's worth noting here that many companies, in an appeal to fairness, typically stop with what we consider white hat thinking. I'd say emphatically that you can move on to each of the other hats and still have fair, compliant hiring practices since the playing field is level across each hat area.



Black: Next, our hiring director moved to critical space for some black hat thinking. This is where you document anything that makes you nervous about hiring a particular person, whether it's about them directly or the circumstances surrounding them.

Sometimes, you'll note that a particular candidate is very expensive with their salary requirements relative to others competing for the role. While it's important to document this during your black hat time, if you balance with the value that candidate will bring by evaluating with the other hats, they may be able to overcome this objection if the money's there to make it happen.

Also, when you really focus with black hat thinking, you'll inevitably uncover those people who may be mere opportunists looking for their next stepping stone (rather than really wanting to build a business with you) or, even worse, are dispassionate about their roles and your company's place within the context of their careers.

Our hiring leader, in this case, was able to figure out who was more of an individual contributor versus a real leader, as well as those for whom relocation might not work.



Yellow: Working through the yellow hat area is a lot of fun with hiring processes. Here, you can rack up the positives that each candidate showcases during your phone interviews.

With yellow hat thinking, you can document who has the nicest record of achievement, which veers into the fact-based world, as well as their preferences. Do they like working in small to medium-sized companies? Are they willing to pitch in and wear many hats, which is a must in emerging players?

If a candidate has particular strength in a much-needed attribute area, such as team-building abilities, yellow hat thinking can help you isolate these pluses and elevate them to proper consideration. Some of our candidates in this scenario really stood out in this area, allowing us to place these candidates in higher consideration.

Green: In the context of making a big hire, our green creative hat translates most directly to growth, and in this situation, remember, we were looking to kick-start



some serious growth at this great little company. One of our candidates really stood out in the green area (and yes, he got the job).

He stood out by talking about concepts like equity, and how he'd like to tie his future to the growth of the company. He showed his capacity for creativity with a 20-year track record of business-building with access to high-profile, high-impact clients, in his formidable "Rolodex." But he wasn't just a producer. He had another side that he instinctively nurtured within himself by giving of himself to others. He was wise enough to see that he couldn't do it all alone, and he had committed himself to become a standout mentor in addition to his standout business development performance. Creating next-generation leaders is critical to your long-term business prospects, and he rated well in this area.

Showing this commitment to creativity and breaking through his own limits really showed us something special. When you're looking at people through the lens of green hat thinking, it's important to let yourself see what your candidates bring to the table outside of the job description. The green hat often reveals not just a solid hire, but a transformational one.



Red: Since I'm a believer in the *Six Thinking Hats* I tell my colleagues to embrace the red hat especially in hiring situations. You'll probably have the most fun here, and when you have on the red hat, you're most likely to find that coveted person with the best organizational fit.

When you're engaging in red hat thinking during a screening process, you're trying to reflect on how you felt while speaking with a particular candidate. Did you like talking to him? Was she interesting? Was there a breathless give-and-take, with someone who matched your passion for what your company does for its customers?

While I noted above that most people only spend time on white hat facts, it's also true that people don't spend near enough time in the red. It's the space where you can apply your corporate culture. If your business is like a family, with lots of laughter, hugging, and beers on Friday, you're going to look for that person who may have all the qualifications but also comes across as gregarious.

To the contrary, if you're running an IT company, which I've done, you need major contributors who communicate their intensity for running fast and troubleshooting at every turn. Those kinds of folks don't care if there's a game room on site, and if that's your business, you probably don't have one to offer. It's all about fit—will this person do his job and make your team better even just by driving positivity with their competent presence?



Blue: The final place we'll touch on with the big-time hire scenario is the blue hat. Here, you're just trying to define the next steps for your hiring process, based on how each screening plays out.

You're trying to make a go/no-go decision with regard to who punches their ticket for the next round. Using blue hat thinking, you'll be able to quickly organize your candidates into those who move forward in the process, those with whom you'll hit the pause button for now, and finally the ones you'll decline any further consideration.

Putting It All Together



During this particular process, where they used *Six Thinking Hats* methodology for the very first time, we identified some clear wins for the CEO and his team. Our hiring leader was able to quickly and fairly evaluate more than 30 candidates, offering each of them a great shot to win her over with their qualifications, intangibles, creativity, winning attributes outside of the job description, and likability.

Because this system, when used to evaluate potential hires, is so powerful, the handful of best candidates are able to separate themselves and elevate their consideration above the rest of the pack. Our hiring director was quickly able to trim her list of 30-plus down to five for the CEO.

And with regard to our CEO, he was able to quickly learn and understand the evaluation process, building his confidence in it along the way. He appreciated how the *Six Thinking Hats* painted a big picture of each person, albeit with great attention to detail. Since our hiring leader documented in each area, he was able to see pretty nuanced information. “Qualified, but not passionate.” “Exceptional business-builder through sales and coaching others.” “Very likable, but reservations about her experience.”

Due to the comprehensive nature of the *Six Thinking Hats*, our CEO had great confidence as well in the fact that lots of ground had been covered during the process, leaving him to drill down in the areas that mattered most to him during his five face-to-face interviews. He could dig more deeply into qualifications and find any other drawbacks as yet uncovered. This efficiency created two great wins for the company by saving him time: he was able to focus his time on billing out at his hourly rate, and he was also able to contribute to the company’s well-being in the strategic, vision-casting ways that only CEOs and founders can do.

Remember, in hiring situations, you’ll need to leave the more utilitarian areas like white, yellow, and black to bring a new focus on the real difference-makers, whose skills, experience, and leadership often lie in the more nuanced areas of red emotions and green creativity.

6

Contemplating a Job Change

Sometimes, confronting the specter of change is our own choice, while at other times, change opportunities land in front of us. Either way, we find ourselves forced to make decisions to assert control over our destinies.

A good example of the latter dynamic, change opportunity presenting itself to you, happened to one of our key employees recently. A young, talented designer at our digital marketing agency found himself being courted and receiving a huge offer from not one, but two much larger, deeper-pocketed competitors.

Thankfully, our leadership team had the kind of relationship with this young man that prompted him to think about his big decision with us, and not operate on his own. As we talked about our desire to retain him, we approached his looming decision with the same kind of honesty with which we had brought him on board to our company and with the roles we had asked him to fill during his time with us.

We asked our designer to walk through the *Six Thinking Hats* methodology to make the right determination for him at this time of his professional career and development. In the process of applying this method of thinking, our employee learned a lot about himself, and his feedback taught us a lot about the agency, a lot of its profound strengths, and some points where we needed to develop.



White: The facts of the situation pointed heavily in favor of our man leaving for greener pastures. To understand this, you need to understand the world of design. Smaller agencies like ours may ask designers to work across multiple areas that are typically siloed at larger companies. Typically, digital design breaks down into user experience (UX), user interface (UI), and aesthetic, visually-appealing work.

Our young designer had an interesting background when he came to us, but he was already establishing himself as someone with serious UX chops. During his time with us, however, he'd been asked to meet the needs of a growing team and its clients, which happened to lie in the more aesthetic area.

Both offers on the table offered him a lot more money (double, in one case), for the opportunity to sub-specialize in the area he's most comfortable in and wants to keep exploring his talent, UX. On our side, with the agency still in growth mode and

relatively young in its life cycle, we couldn't make the same promises, in compensation nor in guaranteeing steady work in the area of his greatest interest.



Yellow: Our consideration began to grow when he thought of the positives of his current situation versus the relative unknown at his prospective suitor companies (notwithstanding compensation and guarantee of UX work). Versus this unknown, he pitted a slew of positives on our side, which included a great family atmosphere for our corporate culture.

Also, he told us that while he'd like to be doing more UX work, he enjoyed working with a bright, young, and developing team. He saw his role as multi-faceted, and at our company he saw a place for himself not just as a designer, but also as a valued team member and resource for others. While he didn't really desire a leadership position, he did want to be one of those top performers and a daily example to his team (and doesn't every company need more of those?!).



Green: From a creative standpoint, each position was challenging our designer in different ways. When people are really good at a particular pursuit and equally passionate about it, whether it's playing the violin, brain surgery, or user experience design, they can seemingly explore that passion without end. That's how our guy felt about UX—it's a deep ocean of water to swim without ever tiring.

On the other hand, with our company and its lack of siloed design roles, there was an altogether different creative viewpoint. Again, dealing with the design team dynamic and love of his fellow collaborators, our designer felt that the team had an extremely high creative ceiling that they could all explore together for years to come.



Black: Much with his analysis of the potential positives at his prospective new employers, our designer couldn't really guess as to the potential negatives of his new arrangement. But with our company being a known quantity, we were vulnerable in this area.

In his sober analysis, he pinpointed negatives that were largely related to our present place in the arc of our growth. These growing pains included being top-heavy in leadership, without enough people in place in key positions to enable him to sub-specialize in his work. On top of this, the rapid pace of our growth kept him and his team from spending the time necessary with each other to share the best practices and great habits for how they go about their work, a defining value for building the agency for the future. Certain measures had to be cut to deliver great work on time and within budget in the present.

We could understand and respect his opinions. This was the life he was living at our agency, and while these dynamics put our relationship at risk, he was making a careful assessment that could inform our future improvement.



Red: For our high-performing and now sought-after employee, emotions were running high. We instructed him to spend some time assessing these emotions and balancing them against the remaining thinking hat areas.

He kept telling us how validating it had been professionally to first be given a role on our design team and second be given almost complete autonomy in his assignments, both by our CEO. I was humbled by his respect for our leadership team and specifically our then CEO, who often leads with his heart and is often rewarded for caring deeply about positioning people for success on his teams.

Our young designer also had strong feelings about his co-workers, telling us how rare it was to find people who you loved to see every day, who would always lift you up and challenge you in friendly ways to bring your best effort to every project.

While he didn't have that common fear associated with change regarding his new employers, and he even had close friends at one of the companies, our designer certainly didn't have any developed emotions, positive or negative about a future elsewhere. This, in comparison to his well-developed love for our company, his leaders, and his peers certainly worked in our favor.



Blue: With the blue process hat, we asked our designer to see into the future and think about how his role, place within the team, and other factors important to him mapped out against our competing agencies. He could see a clear path at both companies. With his pending offers, he could see a one-dimensional future but an appealing one nonetheless, where he pursued his quest to be the world's greatest UX guy.

At our place, he found himself looking through multiple facets. He could enjoy great autonomy, continuing to chart his course as an individual and within a team across a broad palette of work. In addition, he envisioned his role as continuing to explore helping others. Being able to work with other young designers that were high on talent and still developing sound professional habits gave him a higher purpose beyond his own technical ability. He told us that it reminded him of his time doing faith-based and non-profit work prior to joining our agency, where at its most elemental, he was there to do great work and help others be their best.

Putting It All Together



In the end, even at much less compensation and his time spread across work less fulfilling than that of his passion, our designer decided to stay with us (you may have guessed this already since we are writing about it).

For me, growing up in the dead center of Generation X, I don't know which way I would have turned in this situation. My generation was raised to grab that management rung as quickly as possible and to think, in general, money first. But Millennials like our young designer want it all, and money is often down the list when they are forced to choose a determining factor for their jobs and careers, from elements like culture, decision-making autonomy, creative freedom, and personal growth.

What was key for him, in this case, was being able to take comfort in his emotions. He is an emotional guy, with a high degree of emotional intelligence. He knows a good thing when he sees it, has it in his grasp, and he also knows what he has at our agency: autonomy, backing at the highest levels of the company, a family atmosphere, are pretty rare for agencies. And while he was right about our negatives, growth is real and so is the pain associated with it. Some of the same root causes of those negatives, the growth of our portfolio of customers and work as well as the pace of that growth versus the relative youth and small size of our agency, are precisely the same elements that guarantee him so much autonomy and flexibility.

For him, he had the best of almost everything at our agency. The wide berth is typically given to managers, without the hassle. The ability to shape department policies and protocols, without being dictated to from above. And above all else, a place for him to love and be loved, having fun, with less stress.

Sometimes, even a high number doesn't make the difference. In the case of our bright young designer, his high EQ meant that he carefully weighed all of his priorities, and a few emerged for him that were more important than money, at least in the short term. At a different point in his career or the life of this agency, perhaps the other factors may have won the day and caused him to switch companies. Not this time.

Choosing a College

While many of the decisions in this guidebook are more business-oriented in nature, I always like to highlight how the *Six Thinking Hats* can also drive better decision-making in your personal life as well. Let's look at a good example of how the holistic thinking of the *Six Thinking* methodology can influence a personal choice with far-reaching consequences for your career and personal well-being for years to come: choosing a college.

For many of us, choosing a college is difficult. Whether you're talented academically, show signs of athletic prowess at the intercollegiate level, play an instrument at an expert level, or you're just a well-rounded person with several interests, you'll have a big choice to make. The odds are that it won't be a binary choice, either. You'll have to assess large universities and small colleges, public versus private opportunities, maybe even special places like Ivy League schools, HBCUs, or service academies like West Point and Annapolis.

No matter the complexity of your decision, whether you're looking at two schools or six, you can use the *Six Thinking Hats* as a guide to weighing the nuances of one of the bigger life decisions you'll make. As a side note, let me be the first to say that while it's a huge decision, just observing the world around us shows that people who find success and happiness go to lots of different schools--and some don't go at all!

Let's walk through a typical college decision that many young adults face.



White: First, I'd recommend laying out the choices in front of you, using the white hat. You're an exceptional student, so you have a full academic scholarship offer from a large state university, UNC Chapel Hill. You've just been accepted at Princeton, where there are few outright scholarships and the school's private tuition will only be covered partially by a need-based aid calculation.

Next, you have another offer from a top-ranked small college, Davidson, where you'll also have a private tuition investment that's offset to a greater degree by a more generous aid package. Finally, your congressman has nominated you for an appointment to the Air Force Academy, where you'd receive a world-class education tuition-free, with a six-year military commitment in exchange.

So, you've spent your time in high school quite well, and you have a fine group of schools to choose from, with white hat facts that make them both attractive and daunting.



Yellow: Next, let's look at the positives with our yellow hat. UNC Chapel Hill is the nation's oldest public university, and many of its majors and programs consistently rank in the top echelon. Princeton has the class and cache that you can only find in the Ivy League, and its graduates are leaders in every profession. Davidson is an excellent school that flies under the radar a bit, but those in the know put Davidson on par with much higher profile schools like Duke and Emory.

Finally, you have the Air Force Academy. It's widely known that our service academies offer an educational opportunity on par with any of the Ivies, and they exclusively offer incredible classes on military history and strategy.

All of these schools have big positives. Yellow hat thinking probably won't serve as the most directional in empowering your decision this time.



Green: The green creative hat will help you see some nuanced positives in the decision to make your college choice. While you're undecided on a major but looking at going pre-med, you're able to see creatively how each school might have value-adds in addition to a traditional biology or chemistry major to prepare for a career in medicine.

Taking the full ride at UNC Chapel Hill, for example, will allow you to save your college funds for graduate school, so you'll have far less of a hill of debt to climb when you finish all of your schooling in your late twenties. If you find success at Princeton, you'll more likely punch your ticket to a world-class medical school like Harvard or Stanford with a greater chance of establishing yourself as a thought leader alongside other great minds at medical centers of excellence.

Davidson, as a smaller school, will offer you the lowest professor-to-student ratio, and since its mission is undergraduate education, you'll have many more actual professors teaching you versus graduate students at the larger universities. Finally, with the Air Force Academy and pending military service, you can build on what's arguably the best pure educational experience with a medical school that can be offset financially by your GI benefits as you tap into Veterans Administration medical education programs.

You can see that the green hat offers some real pivots to the more generic yellow hat positive considerations. Some schools offer greater value for money, while others offer an express ticket to the top of the pyramid in your profession.



Black: There are certainly downsides to each choice, as the black hat will bring to the fore. At UNC Chapel Hill, you'll matriculate a much more traditional path, with a LOT of other medical school candidates at your side. You may slip through the cracks, feeling like more of a number and less of a person, if you have any trouble with any of your classes, many of which meet in auditoriums.

Princeton has a huge negative that you'll find quite daunting--a huge ticket of financial obligation, which you'll have to mitigate with tens of thousands in student loan debt. As of this writing, a four-year run at Princeton will set you back nearly a quarter of a million dollars. You'd have to be very confident in your own ability to earn money as a thought leader in medicine to take on this type of investment.

Davidson has an interesting set of negatives as well: another higher tuition bill, coupled with less prestige. Thus, while you'd spend less at Davidson than Princeton, you'd still be vulnerable to a daunting ROI post-graduation.

The Air Force Academy forces you to make a very adult decision early on: are you willing to make a six-year commitment and start medical school in your late twenties, thus wrapping up your training perhaps sometimes in your mid-thirties. The potential for missed earnings, depending on your specialty and certifications, could add up to millions of dollars.



Red: As with other types of decisions, it's always healthy to bring the emotional aspects of your decision into careful consideration with the red hat. Your parents went to UNC, and when you were much younger, you dreamed of going to school there. When you hear the alma mater, it speaks to you in a real way after years of attending basketball and football games on campus.

Princeton, being an Ivy League school brings out more competitive emotions. You want people to recognize your achievements and position you for global success, and your acceptance to Princeton has found an extra emotional gear pride of performance. Going to Davidson, while not being something you'd dreamed about in younger days makes you feel like you'd be nurtured and well-taken-care-of in a smaller environment.

Finally, the Air Force Academy harnesses all of your dreams into one. You can serve your country, learn to fly the most sophisticated planes in the world and open up your options for a career to include being a commercial pilot, should a career in medicine fail to ultimately drive you.



Blue: Finally, the blue hat process thinking really helps you line up the differences in your decision. You can make Gantt-style charts that show the options stacked on top of each other, depicting the number of years in the continuum that each school delivers ROI. UNC's ROI is immediate, while Princeton and Davidson will be pushed out several years by student loan debt. The Air Force Academy will delay your potential earnings as a doctor, thus pushing the ROI of your service academy degree way out into the future.

You can also line these choices up the same way and see the career nuances each of them brings to the table. While some (UNC, Davidson) will blaze a more conventional trail to a steady, lucrative career in medicine, others will give you the keys to the top floor (Princeton, Air Force Academy) and position you for thought leadership. Again, the Air Force Academy stands out for opening up another career through your collegiate experience involving certification as a pilot.

Putting It All Together



When you're an exceptional student with choices like UNC, Princeton, Davidson, and the Air Force Academy in front of you, you probably can't make a bad decision, but rather make some good ones and some great ones.

As you weigh the intel you receive from each of the *Six Thinking Hats*, questions emerge to help you decide which of the hats (if any) help drive your ultimate decision. Do you buy into the elite status of the Ivies and believe that a Princeton degree is the only route to greatness in your profession? Or do you even want that—to be a thought leader in medicine (about 10 percent of the physician population), versus a solid doctor who helps a lot of people either escape death or improve their quality of life.

Do you want to serve your country? Are you even worried about the six-year military commitment when it'll give you experience at officer level granted to academy graduates prized by organizations around the world?

Or do you think you need to focus on one day at a time and put yourself in the best position to succeed in college, in a small nurturing environment like Davidson. Better still, are you ready to fly on your own and enjoy the amenities and fun experiences along with an elite education only available at top-tier state schools like UNC, Michigan, Virginia, and Berkeley?

As you can see above, perhaps the best aspect to using *Six Thinking Hats* methodology is that you can look at each hat's factor both separately, in a vacuum, to inform you about nuances to your decision, and in an integrated fashion to help you capture every facet to build a winning choice.

Choosing a Marketing Agency

Whether you're a business owner, manager, or someone assigned a task, you may at some point in your life have to make a decision on hiring a partner or vendor, such as a building contractor, accountant, law firm, or one of my favorite businesses, a marketing agency.

Hiring any of these folks can and should be tricky. Yes, you read that right. You can't simply hire a key partner or vendor based on price. That old cliché, "you get what you pay for," will always kick in, and you can't afford to be cheap with these kinds of choices. Rather, you have to take a comprehensive, nuanced approach.

You'll need to consider a variety of factors, and the price is certainly one of them. But you'll need to think about the value they will bring to your organization at whatever price point they quote, along with other factors, such as their level of understanding of your business, their adaptability and flexibility, and even how you get along with them personally.

I've found the *Six Thinking Hats* methodology particularly effective when evaluating potential partners. Let's see how this applies when selecting a marketing agency. One of the companies in my investment portfolio was an arena football team, the High Country Grizzlies in Boone, North Carolina. Let's apply the *Six Thinking Hats* to selecting a marketing agency for the Grizzlies.



White: Let's lay out the facts of the situation with some white hat thinking. At the time of this writing, the Grizzlies were entering their second season in the Boone market, which has nice reach not only into western North Carolina, but also eastern Tennessee and southwestern Virginia. We needed a marketing partner that could help us reach that market, which is rather widespread geographically, making digital and television platforms more important to reach potential ticket-buying fans. An additional concern is that as a lean organization in startup mode, we needed an agency not just to enhance our marketing capabilities but to bolt onto our organization and become our marketing department.

And speaking of startup mode and leanness, we needed to get as much bang for our buck with any tactical spend—an agency should understand, embrace, and thrive with that mentality as our partner.



Green: Now that we'd coolly assessed our situation, it was time to dream. The green hat is particularly important with regard to choosing a marketing agency, as the focus is on creative. I like to think that agencies can get creative in multiple ways, not just in coming up with a core tagline and accompanying visual. Creativity can extend to video production, music, and even the highly technical. Creative search engine optimization and leveraging of tactics like video and podcasting can create wins for a business.

In this scenario, we find ourselves with three agency candidates. Agency A is good on the traditional creative but off the charts on the technical end of marketing, with a high command of digital advertising and content. Agency B is known for its compelling video production, from its time working primarily in the medium of television. Finally, Agency C seems to have an all-around grasp of graphic and web design, copywriting, and video production.



Yellow: Let's talk positives as we put on the yellow hat. Agency A is very strong on the client side. They have great people managing client relationships, and we can tell through every discovery meeting that the account people are on-point with their meeting setup and execution, as well as follow-up and next steps.

Agency B is known for its offbeat creatives, with the ability to come up with breakthrough, award-winning ideas. Agency C has something we really like—a process that they stress throughout every meeting. With their commitment to the process, we know that we'll always understand where we are in the generation of ideas and incoming deliverables.



Red: With the red hat, where we allow ourselves to explore the emotional aspect of decisions, we like to think about our personal relationships with each of the competing potential partners. Agency A is full of people who seem pleasant, intelligent, and likable. Agency B makes a strong play in the interpersonal arena, full of folks we'd like to have into our corporate box for a beer and a Grizzlies game.

Agency C, meanwhile, takes a more serious approach, and their people are harder to read on a personal level, despite our best efforts.

Black: Now, as we put on the black hat, we can talk about red flags and misgivings we feel with each agency. Agency A comes in with the highest price tag; in fact, their quote is about 10 percent over what we had originally budgeted for our annual marketing spend for the Grizzlies.



Agency B, the zaniest group of the three, gives us the most pause with regard to getting the job done, meeting deadlines, and ultimately living up to our demands. Finally, Agency C is a wild card. Throughout the process, we've gotten to know them as having all around competency, but we're not sure because they are low on the soft skills of developing relationships, if they can truly understand what we need from an agency partner.



Blue: The blue hat means process-oriented, organized thinking and Agency C definitely wins the day with their stated commitment to following a regimented process in everything they do for us. While we don't have misgivings about either Agency A or B, they could stand to augment all of their qualities by showing clients a tried-and-true process like Agency C does consistently.

It's important, if you're a prospective vendor, to let people know exactly how you're going to take care of their needs. When they hire you, they need to move on to actively running other aspects of their company or business unit and leave the details to you. The more you can predict that on the front end, the better your chances of not only winning clients but retaining them.

Putting It All Together



In the end, the *Six Thinking Hats* methodology has offered us multifaceted, nuanced perspectives on hiring a marketing agency for the High Country Grizzlies. By working through each of the hats, we've figured out which aspects of the decision are important to us, as well as what aspects are not as important or nice-to-haves versus essential.

In the end, an agency's creativity on all things digital means the most to us in an organization with a limited budget and a fan base spread across a wide geographic region. In this scenario, we believe that Agency A, with its prowess in digital, will be able to take a relatively small investment and bring us tremendous value with nice returns every day on impressions and engagement through web advertising and social media strategies. Most of all, we believe in their ability to convert online legions into ticket-purchasing fans.

While Agency A came in with the highest price, we believe they are worth the investment, because they are investing in the right tactics with the highest potential for exponential returns.

In truth, if you've narrowed your choices down to three strong agencies, many think there's no way to lose. I take a different approach in my thinking, and the *Six Thinking Hats* drives that difference: where others see a can't lose proposition, I demand that we not just win, but win as big and as consistently as possible. That means parsing through many positives sometimes to see who has the best set of positives.

One time while I was mentoring a young entrepreneur, I told him, "There are lots of ways to win. It depends on how you frame victory. Regardless of whether you set your goals to win big as a growth company or set them lower to meet your lifestyle needs, you're going to work just as hard." I believe in making the big decisions count.

Moving from College to the Workforce

If you're in college, one of the biggest decisions you'll make in life is how you choose to launch your career. Later in life, many people wish they had chosen a different field of study or held out for a different kind of job when they first applied for work holding a bachelor's degree.

In the US, we graduate about half a million people each year with business degrees or degrees in the liberal arts and sciences, as well as the humanities. While a significant chunk of these folks go on to graduate school (30-40 percent annually), that still leaves north of a quarter of a million graduates entering the workforce without a job prospect.

I recently spoke with a gentleman, a successful entrepreneur, about his roundabout road to success in his mid-forties. He attributed his lack of a straightforward path to a rather rash decision he made when finishing his degree back in the late Nineties. At the time, he said, he has pursued a political science degree, thinking he'd teach or go to law school. Exhausted after five years of putting himself through school working two jobs and looking at marrying his college sweetheart later that summer after graduation, he said he decided to ditch law school and graduate school to focus on his new marriage.

After hearing how he struggled for more than a decade in banking and finance, an industry that hires a lot of liberal arts grads, as well as his honesty about his poor fit with that industry (from perspective gained later in life), I thought it would be a great exercise for him to go back to those days and apply the *Six Thinking Hats* to his decision-making process. He'd certainly include some of his rationale from years ago, but he'd obviously take a more comprehensive view with this decision that had pretty far-reaching consequences, as he spent more than 10 years in and out of work in an industry that didn't appreciate nor need his skill set.



White: Let's help the younger version of our now-successful entrepreneur with his career-launching decision by first laying out the facts with our white hat first. This gentleman was finishing a degree in political science, graduating with honors and just a few hours short of a literature/creative writing double major. By working two jobs—one in retail and the other a paid leadership position on the school's newspaper, he'd kept his debt to a decent level at around \$20,000.

He had major health concerns and was nearing his wedding day. While he was qualified for careers in journalism, advertising, and public affairs, he was also looking at what was the hottest industry in his state at the time, banking. The banking industry was growing at an unprecedented pace, with plenty of jobs readily available to liberal arts grads.



Green: Next, let's look at the creative part of the equation with the green hat. When our friend was young, he was excelling in the liberal arts because of his creativity. While you'd think that creativity would be valued in any industry, certain ones can't afford entry-level and even middle management employees to get too creative. Certain industries, like banking, need people who will play within a pretty tight set of guidelines, rather than write their own playbooks.

A talented writer, this gentleman would have been an excellent fit in a journalistic endeavor, such as a newspaper or magazine (remember, this was the Nineties), and later digital media as it evolved. With his boundless creativity sharpened by his creative writing program, he would have made a fantastic junior copywriter.



Red: This decision was pretty low from an emotional standpoint, making the red hat less relevant for our young college graduate's situation. That was part of the problem, he told me, that he had never really dreamed of becoming anything. He'd never really found himself, and while he enjoyed doing certain things—writing, especially, he hadn't dreamed of becoming a professional writer.

Thus, he wasn't really calculating his decision with much emotion. Almost all of his emotional output at the time was focused on his soon-to-be bride, and she was supportive of whatever career choices he made.



Yellow: There were positives to each prospective career path. A banking career had a couple of nice advantages: a higher starting salary and a much faster path to management positions with greater power and compensation. Journalism offered a route to unifying his two greatest passions, writing and politics, while advertising would shine a light on his gift for turning a phrase while offering parity with a banking salary (in the beginning, at least).



Black: Each path also had its negatives, worthy of consideration with the black hat. While journalism would certainly give him everything from a fulfillment standpoint, it would be a financial sacrifice he would perhaps be unwilling to make. Starting salaries at newspapers at the time were 20-30 percent lower than those in financial services.

Banking had some cultural red flags. How would our liberal arts grad deal with shaving his long beard and dropping his activist ethos for a world of suits and taking orders? Advertising seemed easy to understand but the least accessible--he didn't know anyone in the industry, and his college wasn't known for sending graduates to agencies in larger cities.



Blue: This decision had some pretty pivotal process considerations, making the blue hat more important for this gentleman's decision than perhaps many of the others we've discussed.

With his wedding coming up and payments on student debt waiting, our friend needed to find work and find it quickly. He established a three-month window--reasonable for the job market at the time--for finding a job in one of the state's three major markets. He set about applying to different companies in those markets with a goal of securing multiple interviews, with the hope of having a choice to make versus taking the first available position.

Putting It All Together



Using the *Six Thinking Hats* methodology has certainly opened up the possibilities of this decision by looking at several different aspects. It's obvious that our friend, with his limited view of the decision, chose a more lucrative offer in an industry where he saw red flags regarding his fit, something that would plague him for years. He worked for five different banks, was terminated twice, and consistently found himself in over his head. His creative side helped him land interviews and earn positions, but his inability to stick with protocol, which he found boring to the point of madness, often left him in hot water with middle managers whose sole interest was protecting their own positions in highly political environments.

In retrospect, while journalism may have been the best fit for his passions, our friend didn't properly explore launching a career in advertising. Indeed, joining a creative agency would have met his financial criteria and at fulfilled him on some level creatively. Advertising, over time, has proven to be much more dynamic with the advent of digital marketing. This career choice would have offered him a path to explore his creative side, along with plenty of opportunities for advancement, leading other copywriters first, and then later chances to provide direction to an entire creative team of writers, designers, and digital developers.

Thankfully for our friend, he was able to revisit the decision eleven years later. At that time, his wife decided to give him some advice: find a creative profession and apply yourself there. Those people in banking don't like you! That says it all.

Dealing with a Difficult Boss

We've all had them, and there have been more than a couple of movies made about them—difficult bosses.

A bad relationship with the owner or your manager can make an otherwise thrilling and fulfilling line of work turn into your worst professional nightmare and spill over in a big way to your personal life. Sometimes, you realize the situation isn't ideal early on, but it's more likely that after some period of time--months, even years--you just look up one day and ask yourself, "What is this guy's deal?"

Wise people in the business world have always said that it's just as wise to "manage up" as it is to manage your own work, as well as relationships with direct reports and your peers. That's often easier said than done, because of the balance of power in workplace relationships. While you may like to think that everyone's the same, they're not. You need to be able to tailor your personal style, ambition, and goals to those around you, below you, and over you, treating them all as the individuals they deserve to be treated as.

So just how do you negotiate that imbalance of power that tilts away from *you* when *you're dealing with a difficult boss*? You won't be surprised that I believe the *Six Thinking Hats* method of decision-making will help you find the right ways to work yourself into a better professional situation and teach you a few things about your boss and even yourself.



Black: Since this is by definition a negative situation, let's put on the black hat first. Your perception has been that the manager came in after you were hired, by his predecessor, and that he perceives that you aren't loyal to him. As a result, he rarely asks for your ideas, usually doesn't listen if he does, and doesn't even exchange common courtesies with you in workplace otherwise defined by its family atmosphere.

In contrast, you were seen as your original manager's right-hand person, in on all key decisions and a valued contributor in most areas of your work. You see your stock in sharp decline after years of building a reputation as an ideas person accountable for results.

Red: We should next address how all of this perceived negativity makes you feel, putting on the emotional red hat. As each day of this relationship either hasn't grown or has regressed, you've felt a combination of sadness, anger, and self-



blame. While the first two are important, the third one blaming yourself is very important.

That's called accountability. When we build relationships in life, whether at work, on a personal level, or both, we ourselves are accountable for our actions first before assigning blame to others. That's the mark of a mature person with perspective and a little wisdom.



White: Next, it's good to get all of the facts laid out. You can temper your negatives and ill-begotten emotions by assessing the reality of your situation with the white hat. As you look at the facts, you see that when your old boss left the company, you went into a defensive posture, not knowing what kind of dynamic change might bring.

You realize that you've never really taken the time to get to know your new boss on a personal level. You don't know the names of his children. All you know is the coolness of your situation, as you're looking at a multi-dimensional person through your own self-centered lens. The facts help you lay accountability at your own feet, pushing you toward a solution.



Yellow: Remember, with any bad decision, it's important not to beat yourself up too much, even when the facts point the blame squarely at you. So, put on the yellow hat and get some positivity flowing. In this case, it's more of a silver lining, in that you realize that perhaps your relationship isn't hostile, but rather neutral, because you haven't made that personal investment with your boss.

The positive here is that the relationship, while broken and not working for you, can be salvaged with some effort. That's good news.



Green: By wearing the green hat, you can start to get creative about the process of salvaging your relationship with your manager. You've noticed certain colleagues get along with your boss just fine, so you can ask them what they like about him and try to see it for yourself. You can make a direct approach, asking your boss to coffee and seeing how he's settling into his role, as you also let him know what you've enjoyed about the company.

Now that you've seen the real cause of the relationship's stagnation—you—and realized that it can still be turned around, the world is at your feet, creatively. That's good news, too.



Blue: As you brainstorm creative ways to engage and develop a better, more human relationship with your boss, it's important to move to the final hat, which is blue for the process. If you let the situation go on any longer, it'll be more and more awkward, and you'll be faced with greater anxiety.

Use blue hat thinking to put together a plan for implementing these ideas. First, do your research on your new boss—his likes and dislikes, what he brings to the team, and where his gaps may lie so that you can fill them with your expertise and be a great resource to him. Then move to the next stage of planning your actions, such as going to lunch or taking a coffee break together.

Putting It All Together



Situations, where there's an imbalance of power among the parties can be very difficult to navigate. Dealing with someone more powerful than you are, especially one that has power over your livelihood, should be handled with great care.

That's why I think the *Six Thinking Hats* can be so effective during these times. Very seldom in life are "all things equal." There are almost always hidden considerations, which the hats help you reveal, as well as solutions predicated upon these considerations. Furthermore, decisions have tipping points, and the hats will reveal themselves to varying levels of importance.

Another reason the thinking hats can lead you to great decisions is that you are able to spend an appropriate amount of time and energy with the different corners of your mind. Some of your thoughts will betray you. As with this exercise, we discovered that our employee hadn't really gone out of his way to make his boss feel welcome, like any other new colleague. Fear took over, anxiety set in, and our employee lived in a bad reality of his own making, when he could have controlled his destiny all along.

This scenario also illustrates the power of the *Six Thinking Hats* to help you change the game, get a do-over, or take a mulligan whenever you need a fresh start. It's never too late to bet on yourself in building interpersonal relationships.

Making the Right Business Investment

As an entrepreneur, bootstrapping a business can be a prudent route to success. You're constantly building revenues and reinvesting your profits in the company, rather than taking on new capital from outside sources like angel investors, venture capitalists, and banks.

But in some ways, bootstrapping is a harder endeavor, as in some years you're inevitably left with a few dollars and a lot of needs at the company. Almost any time you grow revenue, you're thinking hard about making the right investments that will make it easier to grow even more.

Investments in your business can take the form of hiring new employees and/or contractors, procuring new technology or equipment, buying or leasing more space for your operations, and much more. While many people simply make a pro and cons checklist, I think the *Six Thinking Hats* provide more comprehensive perspectives.

There's a lot of pressure involved in bootstrapping investments in your company. Bootstrapping offers a very little margin of error many times, so it's important to get your decisions right the first time as much as possible.



White: In this scenario, as in most, it's important to get your facts straight first, weighing your legitimate needs for the business with the white hat. After going over your year-end results with your team, you've determined that the business could use two new employees for production, as well as some major technology upgrades. You have enough profit on hand to either fund the employee salaries for a year or fund the technology upgrade, with an estimated viability of three years.

As you probe your team about the technology upgrade, you realize together that the new technology will make the team about 20 percent more efficient across the board, increasing your capacity for greater output.



Yellow: Sometimes, the hardest decisions to make are when you're swimming in a sea of positives. That's where you find yourself with this decision, so the yellow hat may not help you much.

The fact is, you've had a strong year, and you can make a significant investment of adding a couple of new people to your small team or make a high-

impact technology platform investment that'll see real ROI for three years and probably break even for you just into year two.

Which spend nets the greater positive? It's hard to tell. You need to look through the perspective of different hats to find out.



Black: Time to apply some cynical thinking with the black hat. This is much harder to do with the investment in technology. Your people are highly-skilled, and their efficiency assessments are usually correct.

The employee additions, no matter how great your hiring processes and practices may be, are wild cards. Even the most qualified people on paper often turn out to be poor performers or just can't handle the different types of stress associated with working for a small business. While in reality, you have just as much job risk at a large corporation (ever heard of mass layoffs), people tend to have greater job insecurity, at least in their perceptions, working for smaller companies like yours.



Green: Perhaps the choice isn't as binary as you're making it, and the green creative hat can help you assess that question. What if you made the technology investment, committing to monitoring efficiency gains and seeing if the extra capacity gained across the board make your hiring decision for you.

Or, you could look to make the technology investment, with a backup plan of bringing in seasonal contracting to help during your more intense revenue cycles. The green hat helps you see different possibilities that perhaps mitigate the wild card uncovered by the black hat, in contrast with the certainty of the efficiency detailed in your white hat session.



Red: While this decision of where to place your business investment doesn't appear to have much emotion involved, you still need to assess with the red hat to make sure you don't have a hidden agenda.

Many small business owners fall into a certain trap. They're not satisfied with simply bringing in big revenues, being profitable, and positioning for future growth, which are amazing results in anybody's book. Instead, they get into measuring their worth with things like how many people they employ. While I've always taken great pride in employing others, you should never fall into the trap of hiring people to pad your ego. If you're factoring this consideration into the choice of hiring people, this is the time, with your red hat on, to leave that thinking behind.



Blue: The blue hat, as we know, is for the process, and you should think about the effects of implementing your technology upgrade versus onboarding and ramping up a couple of new employees.

In a small business, you realize that you'll have to regress with regard to capacity, whether you've got staff training new people or overseeing a technology vendor and learning new technology. Either way, you're in for a disruption, but you know that after a month or two, everyone will be humming along on the new technology platform. The hiring wild card remains.

Putting It All Together



Making business decisions in any context can be tough. We intentionally chose a scenario that's very real for a lot of successful small business owners, one they face in many if not most years if they're bootstrapping.

The bottom line here is that the *Six Thinking Hats* methodology helps you see many facets of the prism of the decision. You lay out the facts, look at the positives and negatives, get creative (even questioning the pre-set parameters you've made), spend time with and parse out emotional factors, and process your choices.

What you're left with, when you cover all of the hats, is clarity. If you choose to accept the binary choice, and you really need to get the decision right, your more probable better option is going with the technology upgrade. You'll ramp it up faster and with much greater performance certainty than the hypothetical new hires, and the efficiency you drive will help each person in your company offset the work that the new people would be slated to perform.

So, with the technology upgrade, you actually get at least some of the best of both decisions, too, thanks to the clarity provided by the *Six Thinking Hats*.

Final Thoughts

If you read the preceding chapters and took them on board, your journey just got easier. Using the *Six Thinking Hats* method of decision-making won't prevent you from making mistakes. If it did, we'd all be lounging on a private island somewhere.

But that's not the point of the *Six Thinking Hats*, nor should it be the point of life. Life is about learning from your successes and failures, one at a time. There are, in fact, many points to using this methodology.

First, the *Six Thinking Hats* way of thinking gets you to think about many, if not all of the angles and perspectives relevant to making a decision (again, it's the most comprehensive framework I've ever seen, so I've bet my own professional and personal life on the outcomes, to my benefit as it turns out). Second, the methodology helps you prioritize which perspectives are most important to the situation. I hope you noticed that we carefully selected real, based on real, and hypothetical situations not only for their diversity of professional and personal experience but also for the fact that each requires us to find different "dominant" hats.

Sometimes the red is most important because you need to make a decision that's influenced by emotion (it's also powerful that this framework allows us to admit that!). At other times, you need your black hat to keep you out of trouble or your white hat to ensure that you check your emotions at the door and stick to the facts of the situation at hand.

Regardless of your role or the problems you face, you'll find that the *Six Thinking Hats* will help not only with your decision making, but with any associated stress or anxiety. Whenever first responders answer an emergency situation, do they just show up with guns blazing? No. They carefully assess the situation from as many aspects as possible quickly, then formulate a plan of attack and execute.

Does that sound familiar? It should. With each of these scenarios, whether it's a problem approaching at speed such as a looming business investment or college selection, a longer-term issue causing stress or anxiety (lack of rapport with your boss or simply a huge decision for you, like whether to launch a business, the *Six Thinking Hats* will help you keep your cool, calmly assess the different aspects of your decision, and make a choice with a greater chance of success.

One final word: if you follow the framework and still fail or don't achieve the greatest outcome, you can at least know you made the best decision you could with the information in front of you. At the end of each day, that's what I hold myself accountable for, and I think that's a fair standard for anyone.

About the Author

Donald's foray into entrepreneurship began in middle school selling Jolly Ranchers candy from his locker. After leaving college early to pursue his dreams, his big break



came in a sales job with the technology company I-Cubed, where he learned the business through the founder's mentorship, his unrelenting work ethic, and a voracious reading habit.

After becoming CEO of I-Cubed, Donald grew the organization exponentially until it was acquired by a global technology enterprise in 2014. Donald is currently CEO of Walk West, a digital marketing firm recently recognized by Inc. as the fastest growing agency in North Carolina for 2018.

With two decades of experience growing and leading firms, Donald serves on boards for several organizations in the fields of technology, marketing, sports, and entertainment. Donald received a gubernatorial appointment to the NC Board of Science, Technology and Innovation, is an emeritus member of the strategic advisory board for North Carolina State University's Computer Science Department, and serves as a mentor for Google for Entrepreneurs Exchange.

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