

Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company (PPG) used Six Thinking Hats to overcome competing interests and opinions in choosing an alternative business strategy and deciding whether to shut down a plant



PPG is a leading global supplier of glass, fiberglass, coatings and chemicals. In October 2000, the company ran into a dilemma. A core business had become a commodity, and the market was saturated. The company needed a new business strategy.

The Vice President of this business unit, along with a business consultant, had developed four potential strategies, one of which would be presented to the executive board. The Vice President called a meeting to evaluate the strategies. Because the consultant had been through a one-day Six Thinking Hats course, he recommended that Jesse Shearin, a PPG employee and Certified de Bono Instructor, conduct the meeting.

Jesse's challenge was to guide 11 people through the four business strategies and reach a consensus in only four hours.

The group was diverse in rank and title, with specialties ranging from manufacturing to research to corporate marketing. This created competing interests and opinions, because the four strategies had different implications for different parts of the business. For example, some strategies included investing in research and development technology and exiting significant portions of the business.

Jesse began the meeting with a brief overview of the Six Thinking Hats. He explained that the group would use the Six Thinking Hats to evaluate one strategy per hour. Each hour would begin with a 20-minute White Hat presentation of the strategy. This would be followed by a 6-minute Yellow Hat session about how the strategy fits in with current business and a 6-minute Black Hat session on reasons the executive board might veto the idea. Then came an 8-minute Green Hat session on overcoming Black Hat concerns and strengthening Yellow Hat benefits. In conclusion, a 15-minute Blue Hat session would summarize the findings regarding the strategy at hand.

Amazingly, the meeting was adjourned before the four hours' time scheduled. The Vice President had a final decision to take to the company executives, and the meeting participants had extra time to spare before catching their flights.

Three months later, Jesse was again called in to facilitate. This time another PPG business unit had a problem with overcapacity. There were too many plants producing too little product, and the CEO had directed that something be done about it.

Shutting down a plant was an option to consider, although it was an unpopular choice. Closing a plant would affect manufacturing for the next three years. Then, if business picked up—as it was expected to—the company would be unable to meet the increased demand.

A two-day meeting with six plant managers was planned to discuss whether or not to close a plant. Because each of the plant managers was fearful that his or her plant could be the one shut down, they would be reluctant to participate in the discussion. To prevent this from happening, Jesse began the meeting with a customized three-hour Six Thinking Hats training session.

Using the Six Thinking Hats, each plant manager was able to speak freely, even when the topic was the benefit of shutting down his or her own plant. By the end of the first afternoon, the group had already accomplished the original agenda of the entire two-day meeting.

Since they were now ahead of schedule, the team was able to use the second day to discuss alternatives to plant shutdown. They used Green Hat to answer the question, “How can we reduce capacity now while retaining the ability to ramp back up quickly when demand increases?” One suggestion was to close down specific lines or sections of plants, rather than an entire plant. This way, the company would be ready in case they needed added capacity in the future. After generating other ideas throughout the morning on how to effectively close down specific lines, the meeting was adjourned. The meeting had ended three hours early, and no plants would be shut down due to their decision to adopt the partial-shutdown idea.

Using Six Thinking Hats, PPG was able to create synergy between meeting participants where there might otherwise have been insurmountable rigidity. In addition, they were able to effectively evaluate strategies, make an important decision, save time and support all interests and individuals in the company.

Challenges:

- Choose the best of four business strategies in only four hours
- Decide what to do about overcapacity and whether to shut down a plant

Methods:

- Use a specific timed Six Thinking Hats sequence for the four-hour meeting
- Hold a customized Six Thinking Hats training prior to an important two-day meeting

Results:

- Alternative business strategy is chosen in the allotted time
- Plant managers are able to participate freely in discussion and complete the meeting agenda ahead of schedule

Published on www.EdwarddeBono.com

