

SUMBER BAHAN KULIAH DIUNDUH DARI INTERNET

Six Thinking Hats for Group Supervision with Counselor Interns

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how counselors can utilize de Bono's (1999) *Six Thinking Hats* problem-solving technique in group supervision with counselor interns. Part one of the article focuses on an introduction to the technique including a theoretical rationale and supporting research. Part two is a detailed description of the process of using the model as a supervision technique with a group of counselor interns. Part three features a case study of a scenario encountered by a group of counselor interns. Finally, a brief review of the technique and its advantages in individual and group supervision conclude the article.

Introduction

The purpose of the following article is to introduce de Bono's (2008) *Six Thinking Hats* problemsolving model as an innovative, brainstorming group supervision technique. While the focus of the present article will feature a counseling case study, the model itself can be applied to any related group experience in which a creative brainstorm problem-solving method might be utilized. The article will consist first of a brief overview to the benefits of group supervision. An overview of the *Six Thinking Hats* model will then be presented. An applied group supervision case study will conclude the article.

Benefits of Group Supervision with Counselor Interns

Group supervision is the most widely used method of delivering supervision to counselors-in-training (Torres-Rivera, Phan, Maddux, Wilbur, & Garrett, 2001). Groups can also be used to help counselors-in-training with their own personal development and the development of their counseling skills as they experience its therapeutic effects while learning about group work (Yalom, 1995). One specific advantage of group supervision relates to the potential for increased multi-cultural perspectives and diversity (Gainor & Constantine, 2002). Bernard and Goodyear (2004) described the phenomena in group supervision that facilitate supervisee learning. They noted that receiving feedback from peers and hearing the feedback given to others has a positive impact on group members. Rather than being limited to the supervisor's perspectives, group members have the opportunity to exchange a broader range of viewpoints and more diverse input. Supervision offers participants an environment of support and safety in which they are able to ask questions, express common concerns, explore their thoughts and feeling about clients, and discuss positive and negative outcomes. A significant advantage of the group supervision modality is the opportunity for members to learn by engaging in collaborative discussion about clients with whom they are not working directly (Riva & Cornish, 1995). They benefit from vicarious exposure to a larger number and wider variety of cases. In summarizing seven years of peer supervision with counselors, Ruttler (2006) noted the following five most frequently re-occurring benefits based on actual feedback from the counselors. These are stated in order of most frequently reported benefit: Trust and safety, learning from others, greater self-awareness, social support, and more professional identity. Fitch and Marshall (2002) and Dodge (1982) described a five-step process involving the use of cognitive interventions with counseling practicum during group supervision. They outlined the following steps for using cognitive strategies in supervision: 1. identifying and accepting counselors' anxieties and related defensive reactions, 2. identifying cognitive patterns regarding approval and performance demands, 3. challenging and disputing these irrational beliefs, 4. constructing more rational and logical thoughts, and 5. taking behavioral risks that support the soundness of the logical arguments.

An Overview to the *Six Thinking Hats* Model

Two of the challenges of counseling supervision are assisting counselor interns as they build their facilitation, conceptualization, and intervention skills, plus gaining understanding of the clients they serve (Torres-Rivera et al., 2001). Counselor interns are also required to recognize and balance their internal differing points of view in developing a model of integration (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004). The *Six Thinking Hats* model (de Bono, 2008) can be applied to group supervision of counselor interns and can aid in gaining awareness and making decision. The technique is a metaphorical way to view a problem or a counseling situation around six different viewpoints following a certain color scheme and using the theme of thinking hats.

The *Six Thinking Hats* technique is cognitively based utilizing de Bono's own theoretical perspective of Parallel Thinking (de Bono, 2008). Parallel Thinking provides a method of thought processing that is practical, constructive, and invites participants to give their full attention to one point of view at a time. Similar to Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, Parallel Thinking can be taught, modeled, and learned. Additionally, de Bono (2008) believes that Parallel Thinking complements and supports the theory of Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 2006) in which managing and understanding emotions effectively and using them in thinking and reasoning correlate with life outcomes.

The process of the *Six Thinking Hats* was developed to escape adversarial thinking, avoid confusion, generate focus and synergy, and to achieve powerful results (de Bono, 1999). The concept is typically used in business settings; however, applying the same concept in counseling supervision can help facilitate and balance diverse viewpoints and polarities. The respective hats in the *Six Thinking Hats* technique are described by de Bono in the following manner:

1. The White Hat represents pure knowledge gathering, data collection, and historical account. It asks, "What do we know?" It addresses cognition. The process involves exploring facts rather than personal opinions. "First class" facts consist of ones that are checked and proven, while "second class" facts include information believed to be true. Information that is missing is also included here. The white hat covers facts, figures, information needs, and gaps.
2. The Red Hat represents feelings and hunches. This hat legitimizes emotions and explores fears, likes, dislikes, loves, and hates. This hat legitimizes emotions and feeling by focusing on "This is how I feel." It addresses affect by focusing on hunches, intuition, and signal. The red hat is the opposite of neutral, objective information (White Hat). Here there is no need to give reasons or justification for the subjective feelings.
3. The Black Hat focuses on critical negative judgments, a risk analysis. It identifies cautions, dangers and potential problems. It is the logical negative and addresses possible negative effects and what may potentially happen. It can be used to determine weakness in an idea. It also addresses why it does not fit – facts, experience, policy, system and ethics. It asks, "What may be hazardous?" The Black Hat Thinker is a gatekeeper, not a dream breaker.
4. The Yellow Hat symbolizes sunshine, brightness and optimism; it is positive and constructive. It addresses feasibility, benefits, advantages, and savings. It asks, "What could happen (positive)?" The Yellow Hat addresses reframing and permits visions and dreams. Yellow Hat thinking helps keep the group going when everything looks gloomy and difficult.
5. The Green Hat symbolizes fertility, growth, and the value of seeds. It involves creative thinking and the search for alternatives while generating new concepts and new perceptions. The green hat is the "thinking outside the box" creative hat. It asks, "What haven't you considered before?" It involves brainstorming and free association which explore new possibilities, alternatives, ideas, and concepts.
6. The Blue Hat represents the management of the thinking process. Blue Hat thinkers are like the orchestra conductors seeking the proper balance and blending of the other five hats. It asks, "What is the conclusion?" Blue Hat thinking is a final reflection on the other five hats that have been both over and under-utilized in the problem solving exploration. The Blue hat is also responsible for summaries, overviews, and conclusions.

The *Six Thinking Hats* as a Group Supervision Technique

The *six thinking hats* model of conducting supervision appears to offer several benefits for

counselor interns as a method of exploring options for working with challenging clients. Counselor interns often feel a great amount of anxiety both from the new experience of seeing clients with real issues and from the supervision process (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004). Because counselor interns may experience anxiety when presented with challenging cases, supervision strategies that help minimize anxious feelings may be helpful. This model provides a useful structure for exploring options in working with clients, and this structure can be an important component for managing counselor interns' anxiety. Additionally, this process is conducted in a group setting which has many benefits. Group supervision allows interns a safe environment in which to explore alternatives, give and receive feedback, discover distortions in their perceptions and assumptions, and hear alternate views and counseling strategies (Bradley & Ladany, 2001).

This metaphor that de Bono suggested (2008), of wearing one hat at a time, is an apt one in supervising counselor interns in group as the technique indicates a structural sorting out of the problem-solving process. When wearing a specific color hat, the rule is that everyone in the room must think from the perspective of that particular hat. When used with counselor interns in group supervision, the supervisor invites the interns to put on one of the six hats and think collaboratively from that perspective. The rule of everyone wearing the same color hat is that they jointly explore the situation from that perspective exclusively. Everyone then removes that hat and puts on another color hat in order to think differently about the same problem, while all continue to think alike. Like the classic Gestalt empty-chair technique, *The Six Thinking Hats* is the equivalent of structurally moving from one chair then changing the focus when moving back to the other.

The game aspect of the *Six Thinking Hats* is very important. During group supervision, encouraging interns to play the game and stay with the specific thinking hat is a very powerful form of gaining insight and changing perception. It is not unusual for one counselor intern to accidentally move into a different mode of thinking; however, in our clinical experience, individual counselor interns "catch" themselves and revert back to the perspective of the hat he/she is wearing. The intern's habitual ways of thinking have been challenged. A counselor intern or the supervisor may catch another counselor intern during group processing veering off into another mode of thinking and may use humor to rein him/her back to the correct hat. The six hats represent six modes of thinking designed to systematically focus on collaborative rather than competitive thinking. The hats create a future-oriented direction. For example, when a group of counselor interns wear the Green Hat, they imagine creative solutions to the presenting problem. Since they are wearing the same color hat, their thinking is aligned. Rather than discussing that the problem has no solution, counselor interns are encouraged to take an "as if" stance, brainstorming creative solutions to a seemingly intractable problem. The process explores only one component of parallel thinking at a time, allowing counselor interns the reflection time they need to be effective communicators.

The *Six Thinking Hats* system encourages performance rather than ego defense. All counselor interns contribute while wearing a specific hat even though they initially may support an opposite point of view. The goal of this method is to demonstrate how many considerations each person can put forward under each respective hat. One intern's ego is no longer tied to being correct. In using the *Six Thinking Hats* with counselor interns, one of the major benefits is that all counselor interns work collaboratively, focusing jointly on each respective hat. For example, in one group supervision session, one intern appreciated that in his own previous problem-solving attempts, he tended to be the overly optimistic Yellow Hat thinker, while another intern tended to be the overly negative Black Hat thinker. Collaborating as a team helps minimize such polarized, entrenched positions among counselor interns. The *Six Thinking Hats* method fully utilizes the intelligence, experience, and knowledge of all counselor interns in a collaborative rather than competitive manner.

Case Study Using the *Six Thinking Hats*

This is a case study illustrating de Bono's *Six Thinking Hats* model when used in a supervision session with a group of counselor interns who were nearing the end of their graduate counseling program. They were enrolled in their last internship course. While one intern discussed the case, the supervisor instructed other interns "wearing" the *six thinking hats* to aid her in conceptualizing the marital counseling case she was presenting. The volunteer herself also wore each hat during the process. In the case study below, the female counselor intern will be described as the volunteer.

The couple in this case had been together for ten years and had two children together. A

presenting issue was that the couple had no time to spend together. The husband had trouble relating emotionally and intimately in the marriage. When he tried to express intimacy to his wife, he felt attacked by her. Subsequently he physically withdrew and became emotionally unavailable to her. She then further verbally attacked him, believing her needs were not being met. At the beginning of the brainstorming session, the volunteer stated that her goal for the group was to assist her in choosing intervention strategies to help the couple find better ways of interacting with each other.

White Hat Thinking: Data

The brainstorming session began with the volunteer presenting White Hat data, featuring the background information and information discovered in her counseling sessions to date. The supervisor invited other counselor interns each to wear the White Hat while he focused on their thoughts and ideas. Below is a summary of her case study presentation. The wife reported she had many attachment injuries from her upbringing. Her father had wanted a boy and she felt rejected by him. Her ex-husband was addicted to pornography; he also was sexually abusive during their marriage. The current husband believes his wife has more life experiences from which to draw upon in the relationship. He also feels he has had no role models for helping him in expressing emotional intimacy. His parents are divorced. Although he still seeks approval from his demanding dad, he does not feel he will ever get it. Presently the couple have exchanged their previous roles. He stays home with the children and she works while also going to school. The volunteer asserted that the husband demonstrates ADHD traits because he has trouble keeping a daily routine with the children. The wife criticizes him by bragging that she did a better job when she was at home than he does now. They changed roles because the husband was very miserable in his job; he often displaced his unhappy feelings from work onto the family. Because she originally had gone to work so he could quit his job, she presently resents feeling obligated to work. The wife is very bitter about this. Although she would prefer staying home, she states she enjoys going to school. In previous counseling sessions, the volunteer stated that although the husband had not seemed committed to working on improving their relationship, she believed that he now is giving effort to the process. Her stated goal was to help him break the negative cycle in which the wife verbally attacked her husband, who then withdrew and shut down, whereupon the wife re-attacked because her needs were not being met. The couple reported being unaware of this cycle prior to counseling.

Red Hat Thinking: Feelings and Hunches

The volunteer was asked to identify the couple's feelings as well as her own feelings toward the couple. The group then brainstormed with Red Hat thinking in which they shared their feelings, intuitions, and hunches about the case. Various counselor interns offered possibilities such as:

- The husband wanted to play a subordinate role but be in control;
- The wife enjoyed being in a place of power for the first time in her life, and that this made her feel safe;
- The wife felt anger, and the husband felt defeated, discouraged, and that nothing he did was good enough;
- The wife took over because she felt her husband was inadequate;
- The wife felt betrayed because he did not meet her needs and that she felt forced into working;
- The husband would be satisfied with his stay at home role if he was not getting constant badgering about not living up to his wife's expectations.

The volunteer stated that she felt frustrated with the couple because of their entanglement

Black Hat Thinking: Challenges and Obstacles

The supervisor then helped the counselor interns to discuss the potential problem of the case as they metaphorically took off the Red Hats and put on the Black Hats. The Black Hat represents judgment and caution and must be logical. One intern asked that if the wife was happy with the control, why would she be complaining? Another wondered if the wife was really being honest with herself in saying she wants to be a stay-at-home mom, noting that when she had the chance to stay home, she took a full course load at school. Some other observations were that the wife does not want another failed relationship since she now has

two children. The couple may be saying there is a problem in their relationship, but are resisting change because on some level, they have become comfortable with it.

Yellow Hat Thinking: Optimism

Positive considerations for each option were explored as the couple wore Yellow Hats.

Moving

the group into Yellow Hat thinking in which the positive aspects and under-utilized strengths about the case include such comments as:

- The couple show up for counseling, and while the husband did not seem to invest much energy into counseling early on, he tries to work in session and even addresses his wife in session when directed. The husband also is more hopeful about their relationship.
- The couple want to stay married, and are not seeking to exit the relationship.
- Additionally, they evidence much personal insight, showing they are aware of how past hurts are playing out in their current relationship
- Both partners are giving effort in that one is taking care of the children and the house while the other is working and attending school
- The wife exhibited compassion and sacrifice in taking the fulltime job to relieve her husband's misery at his job.
- Both the husband and the wife are showing responsibility in that they are doing *something* for each other.
- The couple show evidence in session that they are coachable: they have a common goal to raise the children and they evidence respect for the therapist.

Green Hat Thinking: New ideas and Creativity

The volunteer encouraged the couple to think outside the box while wearing Green Hats by exploring if there are other options they may consider. Moving into Green Hat data in which problem-solving strategies are considered in order to produce growth, the volunteer suggested that the couple need to explore their resources more to counteract their stress. It appeared to the group that the husband felt inferior to his wife. The supervisor suggested that, from a transactional analysis perspective, the couple were playing a game that helped them avoid intimacy. He proposed that the game was providing homeostasis in the relationship and as such the couple may not really want to change. Some additional recommendations were that:

- They could delegate responsibilities to the kids.
- The couple could consider day care and thought they might qualify for other resources because they had only one income;
- Instead of thinking of this couple as being stuck in a cycle there might be another metaphor that could be helpful in describing the couple;
- The couple are very busy, and they have a "full plate" and the volunteer suggested that a plate holds nurturing food. Therefore, the group began to suggest that a plate holds nurturing food, and that the couple could think of ways to pile on good things in their relationship to nurture each other;
- The couple have difficulty finding ways to support each other;
- The couple could focus more on their roles as husband and wife, not just the roles of mother and father. Also, before long, there will be only one child at home rather than two, and then the couple will have free time together;
- Some of the busyness the couple experience will, in time, take care of itself;
- It would be helpful if each partner sought individual therapy;
- There may be some gender influences at work in therapy, and the supervisor pointed out that it is rough for the volunteer to work with a couple. Including another therapist who is a male in the session might provide support to the student as well as influence the session by balancing the number of males and females.
- The volunteer might help the couple explore family of origin issues together by using a genogram;
- The couple need to see the positive factors about their relationship that the students see.

Blue Hat Thinking: The Process and Meta-communication

The group began their overall review of the preceding five hats using Blue Hat thinking. Wearing the Blue Hat, the supervisor reminded the counselor interns that one intern had said the white hat thinking was chairman of the meeting; this caused the discussion to change and

move on. One intern noted that the Red Hat had been frequently ignored and thought the group was not as comfortable with Red Hat data and that they avoided it. Finally, reverting back to searching for even more White Hat data, the session ended with the counselor interns choosing to watch a portion of a taped session, in order to glean even more information. Authors note the need for additional white hat data may be common when you are feeling frustrated with a particular case. Interns often revert to seeking what can be known in order to help generate an understanding of what is not yet known. Additional Red Hat data relating to the volunteer rather than to the couple were discussed. The volunteer reported that she felt desperate to help this couple and questioned why she should drive so far if there was no progress. She stated that she was not sure where her responsibility for the couple begins and ends and wonders if she should refer them. She questioned the quality of her work and felt a heavy burden for this family. She also said she may even be somewhat burned out. She also felt compassion for the couple, stating that it is "tough to have two kids and have all this stuff in your background." She also felt disappointed in the progress the couple had made because she had thought they had great potential. She wondered if she should refer them and if she has done enough for them. She finally concluded that she is "an all or nothing kind of person" and she wants something to happen right now. The supervisor who had watched the session felt the volunteer's work in the session was masterful, wonderful, and delightful. He encouraged her to recognize her good efforts, and he also wanted her to feel nurtured and hopeful as she has tried to instill hope in the couple.

Limitations

The authors propose some possible limitations when using this problem-solving process. First, one or more counselor interns in the group might passively agree appearing to contribute to each of the six hats, while not necessarily reconsidering their own original preference. This can result in a more passive, low-energy approach to the activity. The same can also be true of the volunteer presenting the case study. If there is not a genuine willingness by the volunteer to consider other options, the group may feel devalued. A possible solution to address the above issues is for the supervisor to stress group norms as being foundational for establishing a safe, trusting, and non-evaluating environment at the very beginning of the process. Another recommended solution to either group or volunteer (case presenter) bias is for the supervisor to encourage them to "act as if" they are willing to consider new solutions to their preconceived notions. From the very perspective of the green hat stressing "outside of the box creativity", the six hats themselves may not be comprehensive enough to capture the breadth of the participants' problem-solving. A suggested solution is to go back to the blue hat and ask "Is there anything else that has not been adequately addressed by any of the hats?" Another limitation is that the volunteer as well as the group members may feel overwhelmed with too much data being generated. This is especially true for visual learners. Having someone post the suggestions for each respective hat on the board is one suggestion. Asking the volunteer to either select some of the most salient suggestions or even to wait a week and report back to the group on helpful feedback is another option.

Conclusion

The authors have utilized the *Six Thinking Hats* problem-solving method in a variety of counseling and supervision activities (Li, Lin, Nelson, & Eckstein, 2008). In this specific supervision session, the supervisor was impressed by the many listening checks the technique generated including summarizing and paraphrasing each other's ideas. The supervisor and the other counselor interns collaborate on each respective hat. The brainstorming technique helps minimize polarized, entrenched positions among counselor interns. A shared nomenclature can be used both in future supervision sessions as well as by the counselor interns themselves to demonstrate a systematic approach to exploring solutions and reaching consensus. For example, the supervisor can say, "We need more Green Hat thinking."

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