



Six Thinking Hats

Case Study: Boeing

Boeing is the world's largest producer of commercial jetliners, and Boeing jets make 85% of the world's commercial flights. So when Boeing Toronto, Ltd. faced an employee challenge in the late 1990s, the company needed to resolve it as quickly and efficiently as possible.

The issue involved employees who were returning to work after disability leave. Due to physical restrictions, these men and women needed light-duty jobs that would not cause physical strain. For instance, some employees could lift only a certain amount of weight, and some could stand for only a limited amount of time.

The problem was that entitlement to the light-duty jobs was strictly governed by union guidelines. Under union agreements, seniority determined who held those jobs, and most returning employees did not have the seniority rights necessary to acquire the positions.

To compound the problem, workers at Boeing Toronto were being laid off. In the unionized environment, the younger workers took most of the cuts while the older employees were protected. As a result, light-duty jobs were in even greater demand due to the average age of remaining employees. Yet more light-duty jobs still needed to be made available to the employees returning from disability leave.

The Joint Modified Work Committee was called upon to resolve this predicament. The committee, consisting of both union and management representatives, came up with a list of 24 possible solutions. Although this was a great start, the committee wasn't sure how to proceed from there. Certain suggestions were being favored depending on whether the idea had come from management or union. In deciding which ideas to implement, partisan lines needed to be erased so a win-win solution could be reached.

In order to overcome the deadlock, President Steve Fisher encouraged the joint committee to implement the Six Thinking Hats. Steve asked Dianne White, the Manager of Education and Training, to facilitate a Six Thinking Hats session that would thoroughly analyze a few of the best ideas. But there weren't merely "a few" ideas to analyze; there were 24. Dianne decided that the committee should first prioritize the 24 ideas, so she held a vote. Each committee member identified four favorite ideas to explore further, and then the most popular ideas were thoroughly evaluated using all Six Thinking Hats.



The solution broke the tension between union and management because everyone had an equal voice in the final decision. This de-politicized the environment, and made it possible to evaluate ideas on their own merit.

One of the top proposals involved an early retirement incentive package. If the senior union members could be convinced to retire early, light-duty jobs would be naturally freed up without hassle or resentment. After analyzing this idea using the Six Thinking Hats, the committee decided to implement it. They called it the Voluntary Exit Program, and the response to it was astounding. More than 250 people took advantage of the program.

However, this solution did not completely solve the problem. Even though more light-duty jobs were now available, those jobs were still awarded on the basis of seniority. The committee made a bold move and asked the union for a Memorandum of Understanding. This would enable seniority rights to be waived so that light-duty jobs could be reserved for those who needed them most.

The Memorandum of Understanding was a big breakthrough for the committee because changes in seniority rules were usually obtained through formal bargaining. This was a significant move away from a conventional method to a more compassionate approach. It occurred, in part, as a result of the synergy created by Six Thinking Hats. Participants had finally managed to set aside their personal agendas so everyone could work collaboratively toward a positive outcome.

Challenge

- Make more light-duty jobs available to employees returning to work after disability leave
- Ensure union approves all company changes

Method

- Use Six Thinking Hats to develop an early retirement incentive package
- Rely upon the synergy created by Six Thinking Hats to ask for a Memorandum of Understanding from the union

Result

- 258 employees participate in the incentive program
- Union accepts the Memorandum of Understanding

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