

The Business Of Farming: Six Hats

It is not the situation but what you do about it that determines the future

By S. D. Parsons

What does one do when faced with apparently insurmountable obstacles? That is without doubt the question that all of us would like to have answered.

I am reminded of the tale of two generals who faced just such a problem. The first general addressed his officers in the following way, "Gentlemen, to say the least the situation is very grave. The enemy outnumbers us. They have superior firepower and they hold very strong positions. They may attack from the south, or they may attack from the north. The latest intelligence information we have is that they are positioned to cut off our retreat. The situation appears hopeless. There appears to be no option but to fight the best way we can and with luck we will get ourselves out of this mess."

The second general informed his officers of the situation in similar vein, but instead he said, "These are the strategies that I recommend. If they attack from the north"— and here followed a plan of action. In the same way he addressed the other approaches with plans of how to respond.

As hopeless as the situation might be there is always an alternative. It may not be attractive or even palatable but there is always an alternative. The person who has considered the options in advance is far more likely to succeed than the one who simply trusts to luck.

Of course our major concern and the really urgent issue is the state of lawlessness that pervades the country. As if that was not enough to contend with there is also the disastrous economy, fixed exchange rates, high inflation and associated high interest rates. I have written previously about those problems and ways to combat them – however inadequate that may be in a column of this length, but today I turn to an issue that is always with us, and that is the subject of management succession.

At the first Business Link school on Nyanga last week the wife, co-manager and co-owner of one of the country's biggest farms presented her 'board' with a case study of a real life farming situation in Zimbabwe. The process she employed was one developed by Edward de Bono (the originator of lateral thinking, and also of the Neighbourhood Watch concept). In one of his many books de Bono describes Six Thinking Hats¹ as a way of thinking about problems and also of communicating with one another.

The first hat is the White Hat, or factual hat that simply states the facts. The Black Hat is the negative hat, the devil's advocate, which represents why an idea or proposal won't work. Conversely, the Yellow Hat is the positive hat that supports a new idea and builds on the Green Hat, or creative hat that comes up with new ideas, and new ways of looking at things. The Red Hat is the emotional hat representing the full range of emotions from positive happiness and laughter to negative sadness and anger without necessarily saying why. Finally the Blue Hat is the controlling hat – a bit like the chairman of the meeting.

The lady in question asked four people to each represent the Black Hat, Red Hat, Green Hat and Yellow Hat while providing answers to the following White Hat scenario.

A farmer and his wife have four sons who all want to farm. The first is a horticulturist, the second an engineer, the third a business administrator and the fourth a computer boffin.

¹ de Bono, Edward 1986. Six Thinking Hats, Little Brown & Co

The couple own three farms. The wife manages the roses on the home farm while her husband, who is a successful conservative cash farmer, runs the rest without the help of middle managers.

Suddenly their once peaceful nation changed to one of anarchy, unpredictability, lack of viability and concern for the future. Both of them are tired, stressed and need a change. They would like more help and ideas of how to go about getting that help.

Though there are other urgent issue that occupy our attention at present, the question of who takes over the business and how it is done is of supreme importance. In my experience as many as eighty percent of family businesses run into major family conflicts over this issue and many of them fail as a result.

Rather than prattle on about what to do about her dilemma I would like to involve you in the alternatives of whether the couple should invite their sons back, and if they do which one, or which ones? How and when would the sons take over decision-making authority and the accompanying responsibility? There are obvious Red and Black hat issues involved here, but in addition to these we need creative Green and Yellow hat suggestions.

The reason I am involving you in this task is because by sharing ideas and opinions we can all learn more. Years ago an Argentinean put it this way, "If I have an apple and you have an apple and we exchange apples we each have just one apple, but if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange ideas we each have two ideas.

I would like to get your Green, Black, Red and Yellow hat ideas on how this couple should proceed - preferably by email but by post if you are not wired. The comments needn't be long just a few words explaining your point of view would be great. I'll summarise and include your views in future articles.

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