

# The art of coaching

## Thinking partners

Linda Aspey

I've always thought that I did a pretty good job of paying attention to my clients. But that was before I came across an approach from Nancy Kline of Time to Think, called the Thinking Environment™, outlined in Nancy's books *Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind* and recently in *More Time to Think* (see [www.timetothink.com](http://www.timetothink.com)). This is a way of being with others that enables people to truly think for themselves, as Nancy says, 'with rigour, imagination, courage and grace'. It made me realise that the quality of attention I sometimes gave was often compromised by the many ideas, models, questions, theories and frameworks whizzing around my head which I might share with the client.

Yet explicit in the Thinking Environment is a guarantee that the listener or 'thinking partner' will not interrupt or ask questions until the 'thinker' has done all the thinking they want to do, whether talking aloud or when they are busy thinking silently. Its basic premise is that the quality of everything we do depends on the thinking we do first, and whether or not people can think for themselves well is determined by how they are treated by the people with them whilst they are thinking. The Thinking Environment has 10 components, at the heart of which is sustained and seamless Attention, along with Ease, Equality, Encouragement, Appreciation, Diversity, Information, Feelings, Place and 'Incisive Questions'™ (that challenge limiting assumptions that may be untrue but which the client often lives as true). Each of these components has a specific meaning in the approach, and individually or

collectively they appear to have an impact on thinking. The principles can be applied throughout life and work, and can be utilised by anyone; those wishing to develop expertise can train to become a licensed coach, facilitator or consultant.

When most people are offered uninterrupted time to think, they say, 'I couldn't possibly keep talking.' And yet when they do start talking, under these conditions, and with the single question from the listener, 'What would you like to think about today, and what are your thoughts?' something quite amazing seems to happen. It's like watching brain connections being made before your very eyes. The Attention and all the other components seem to ignite the client and liberate completely new thinking.

Nancy believes that these components, most particularly Attention, Ease and Equality, create such a level of safety that the thinker can access a level of insight previously unknown to them, enabling them to appropriately release their feelings and generate new ways forward, without prompting from the listener.

Whilst the idea of the Thinking Environment is simple, it's not necessarily easy to use and requires practice. Some practitioners might find it initially hard to give this level of attention, to listen with interest, not just to what the thinker is saying but to what they might say next, never moving their eyes from the thinker, letting them talk, holding back from sharing an idea. And even when they

say that they are done thinking, asking, 'What more do you think, or feel or want to say?' because there usually is more. It takes courage to trust the intelligence of the thinker by staying silent, but it helps them to arrive at the finest outcome.

Many neuropsychologists are interested in what happens to the brain under these conditions, and the concept of 'Limbic Resonance' (empathic harmony arising from the limbic system of the brain, first described in the book *A General Theory of Love* by Lewis, Amini and Lannon) seems to offer a possible signpost. They believe that our nervous systems are demonstrably attuned to those around us with whom we share a close connection – this Limbic Resonance is 'a symphony of mutual exchange and internal adaptation whereby two mammals become attuned to each other's inner states'. Research by the HeartMath organisation has explored the effects of Appreciation on the heart and cortex, with some interesting findings about how it increases blood flow (see [www.heartmath.org](http://www.heartmath.org)).

The Thinking Environment has made a significant impact in the world of coaching, and I understand is being utilised increasingly in therapy too. At its heart is a positive view of human capability and a desire to empower people to shift their thinking and make the changes they want, with the thinker/listener relationship as the catalyst, generating all kinds of possibilities for better thinking and most importantly, better outcomes. ■

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