

**Coaching
at Work**

Road Test: Think Well, Think Together

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Thinking Environment® in Groups and Teams

What is it?

As technology shapes our lives in new ways every day, the need for people to work relationally, in alignment and with intelligence is increasingly important. We need to think well, together.

You don't need a high IQ, experience, or prior knowledge to think. But if the conditions around us aren't conducive to good quality, independent (i.e. original, non-compliant) thinking, we won't get great ideas, make progress or make good decisions. One of these conditions is, as Nancy Kline of Time to Think observed many years ago, the quality of the attention that people give to each other when thinking and talking together.

Over time, she observed a further nine conditions that reliably support independent thinking; she called these The Ten Components of a Thinking Environment: Attention, Ease, Equality, Diversity, Encouragement, Information, Feelings, Information, Appreciation, and Incisive Questions™. From these evolved the "Thinking Session" which has since been applied in coaching¹. Further applications emerged as practitioners applied the Thinking Environment in other contexts including with groups and teams.

How does it work?

Often people in groups and teams don't get the chance to contribute what they think, or it isn't safe to. Others may contribute too much and dominate. Hierarchies, silos, competition, risk aversion, lack of confidence, often fuelled by fear, can stifle positive interactions and effective thinking. Creating a Thinking Environment can quickly change the dynamics. As research from Google's Aristotle Project² demonstrates, psychological safety (an individual's perception of the consequences of taking an interpersonal risk) is key to high performing teams, and I think it's also key to meaningful group participation.

Whatever the event, it puts the people in the room firmly in the driving seat of creating the culture in the here and now. There are several "building block applications" for groups - Rounds, Thinking Pairs, Dialogue and Open Discussion, along with "full applications" such as the Time to Think Council. All are underpinned by the Ten Components.

The Experience

Naturally I need to “be” a Thinking Environment myself, otherwise it will not be congruent, and keep all Ten Components in mind throughout. With any group, to begin, I introduce three or four Components, allowing others to emerge whilst doing or reflecting upon activities. For example, I request that people don’t interrupt whilst others are speaking and instead give their full attention. I invite them to be and treat each other as equal thinkers; restrictive power and personality hierarchies can begin to dissolve. And by inviting people to be encouraging and interested when others are sharing their thoughts, rather than being intent on competing with a better idea, everyone’s thinking will become bolder.

The Application

The Transforming Meetings™ programme is a one-day course teaching the Components and applications to teams and workgroups. They can also be woven into team coaching, facilitations, workshops, conferences, offsites, right from the planning stage. For example, we always start with a Round or series of smaller group Rounds, so that everyone gets to speak if they wish to. After a presentation from one of the participants, I can suggest Thinking Pairs or Dialogue to think together and bring back, to the whole group, their considered views or questions. I coach them to ask questions that will generate new thinking and not just answers, which people are often prone to do too quickly. I use Incisive Questions that help them to discover any untrue, limiting assumptions about changes or challenges, and replace them with true, more liberating ones, shifting thinking from stuck to empowered and emboldened. And in preparing a place for them that is welcoming, easeful, comfortable, fresh and attractive, I have told them that they matter.

The Verdict

I have found that having just one of the Components present improves interactions and thinking; when all Ten are brought to bear, meetings of all kinds can be transformed into highly productive and satisfying experiences for all. It is rare that a group or team does not enjoy the experience; I always do.

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The Client

The Experience

I manage 30 engineers who are passionate about what they do - it’s wonderful hearing so many ideas about solving problems. However, their keenness to share means that meetings can be chaotic with dominant engineers fighting for attention and quieter ones being blocked from contributing.

Initially when I introduced the Thinking Environment some eyes rolled as I explained Attention, Diversity and Ease. Then we started with a Round - some struggled, uncomfortable looking into the eyes of the person speaking, not interrupting and having to sit still as they waited their turn. But soon, the atmosphere became calm and attentive as they listened to each other in this new way. They seemed genuinely interested in the diverse ideas that the quieter team members had, including one completely new solution to a seemingly intractable problem! That meeting went from being negative and doubtful to positive and purposeful.

I also enjoy using Thinking Environment in other parts of my life and am noticing a new clarity, calmness and sense of progress. I'm always amazed at the impact of asking what people think instead of providing the answer, for example, one of my team came to me with a problem and asked what he should do. Genuinely interested, I asked him what he thought. He paused, looked at me, described the pros and cons of various methods and came up with a strong solution. He thanked me for my advice!

The Verdict

Overall, Engineering meetings have changed from chaotic and stressful to calm and collaborative with stronger outcomes, as one team member commented to me recently, "I got goose bumps from the exciting ideas we came up with." It's gratifying to hear that some teams have even started using some of the Components and building blocks when I am not there. And it's permeating into day to day conversations, slowly but surely.

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UPSIDES:

- As the Thinking Environment is more of a way of being than of doing, it can easily be built into existing programmes and complement other tools and exercises.
- Raises awareness of unproductive team and group behaviours in a non- judgemental way, so people are more likely to take the practices into day to day working and personal lives.

DOWNSIDES:

- Some resist because they assume that that competition, urgency and challenge is a good thing ("as long as it's not aimed at me!") and yet thinking clearly when stressed or under fire is extremely hard to do.
- Requires discipline to maintain; groups and teams can slip back to old ways unless committed to sustaining the new, more productive culture.

References and Further Reading

¹ Road Test: Go Your Own Way
Linda Aspey and Michelle Lucas
Coaching at Work magazine, Volume 9, Issue 2, March 2014

² Understanding Team Effectiveness
Google Aristotle Project
<https://rework.withgoogle.com/guides/understanding-team-effectiveness/steps/introduction/>

Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind
Nancy Kline
Cassell Illustrated (1998) / ISBN-10: 0706377451 / ISBN-13: 978-0706377453

More Time to Think: A Way of Being in the World
Nancy Kline
Fisher King Publishing (2009) ISBN-10: 1906377103 / ISBN-13: 978-1906377106

Aside from hard data, how do you know your culture change efforts are working?
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<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/aside-from-hard-data-how-can-you-know-when-your-culture-linda-aspey/>
www.timetothink.com