

Create space to think and get better results more of the time

With all the messages we hear about the need to change, move faster in order stay competitive, it seems to me that we are often drawn down a path of assuming that being productive means 'doing more' and that taking the space and time to think is a luxury we can't afford. But do you really think that's true?

How often are we able to think well? Have you ever spent long hours in meetings feeling frustrated with interruptions, the dominance of a few more vocal members of the group and the lack of clarity of output? The coffee machine conversations are often where the real discussion happens and the difference in conclusions comes out. Surely there are better ways of harnessing the power of our brains?

This is a topic that's close to my heart. When working with individuals and organisations I'm constantly striving to help them get better results and increase levels of satisfaction and engagement. I've come across one way to achieve this in Nancy Kline's work. Having seen the impact, I can get rather evangelistic about it (so I'll try and avoid that!). Over 35 years ago as a teacher at a Quaker school, Nancy noticed that the results children got were far less to do with their level of intelligence than the way they were being treated. She started her search for what made the difference and has created an approach called the Thinking Environment.

Nancy's whole premise is that ***the quality of the decisions we make and all the results we get are founded on the quality of the thinking we do first*** (tough to argue with in my view!). So, if we want better results, then taking time to create the conditions to enable us to do the highest quality thinking would be a good place to start.

She's developed a set of approaches which work for 1:1 coaching, meetings and pretty much any interaction between people which are all focussed on enabling each individual to think well for themselves (and we're all capable of that aren't we?). It's not rocket science and the framework and processes that enable this to happen are deceptively simple – but it's in the way it is handled that you see the difference.

For me, it all started a couple of years ago for me. Part of my consulting practice is coaching and after 15 years I was keen to find the next stretch the develop my skills and what I had to offer – and if I'm really honest, I was rather egotistically searching for the perfect question that would unlock what was going on for my clients.

I read Nancy's book *Time to Think* and was intrigued by the account of a pharmaceutical firm where a major product (and the reputation of the organisation) was saved in under an hour by the way the meeting was structured and the breakthrough in thinking for an individual who was perceived as

negative and difficult. But it all seemed too simple and it wasn't until I attended a workshop that I started to realise what it really meant and felt like.

In coaching I've witnessed an individual eradicating the blocks to making a big life decision that she said she had known she needed to make for 8 years. It enabled me to work out what was stopping me from taking time to do something I love – playing the saxophone (which I had previously discussed with a coach using a different model). I'm now in several bands! With groups, the results can be dramatic. We worked with a company and its Hungarian outsourcing partner who were at breaking point a year into their contract until they created a breakthrough by uncovering a fundamental difference in their criteria for handing a new product into full production – they said the event saved them 6 months!.

There's more to it than I can articulate in this article, but there are some simple first steps that are powerful in enabling someone to think well. **Let me highlight a few of the 10 components that are the foundation for this:**

Giving Attention – nothing is more distracting than knowing that someone is not focussed on what we're saying and thinking (I'm sure you've experienced the person doing email or looking at their watch whilst you're talking or is that just me?) Instead of taking our turn in our head or a version of listening which is waiting to speak focussing on being intrigued by where this person will go next with their thinking makes a real difference. This is 'listening to ignite the mind' (the subtitle of Nancy's book Time to Think).

Creating Ease is crucial - When we allow someone uninterrupted time to share their thoughts (and stay with them even in busy moments of silence), it allows their thinking to go further. That doesn't mean they can go on for hours without concern for others' views. For the privilege of not being interrupted, they also have the responsibility of being succinct!

That's where Equality plays a part – **Giving equal turns and attention** and treating each other as thinking peers. This can be set up easily in a group with rounds (something many facilitators use) interspersed with discussion and if needed short thinking sessions in pairs.

So, if you're reading this and wondering how you might apply it, here are some simple steps:

- Set up the conversation or meeting in a way that is consistent with as many of the 10 components as possible (we've touched on 3 of them)
- Start with a well-crafted question (whether it's structuring your agenda with a question or posing a question for the group to work on). Why? Because questions stimulate thinking.
- Set up a positive & appreciative environment – that could simply be by asking what's going well or framing a question positively (for example what would enhance our customer service? Rather than what are the issues with our customer service?). In my experience, we're very skilled at critical thinking and analysis. Also we know from research that more of the brain functions in the presence of positive focus and praise than problems focus and criticism. In my experience this creates generative thinking.

It sounds straightforward – and it is. There’s an art to doing it really well and for me that only became clear in practice.

The Ten Components of a Thinking Environment

Attention	Listening with palpable respect and without interruption
Incisive questions™	Removing assumptions that limit our ability to think for ourselves clearly and creatively
Ease	Offering freedom from internal rush or urgency
Appreciation	Offering genuine acknowledgement of a person’s qualities
Encouragement	Giving courage to go to the cutting edge of ideas by moving beyond internal competition
Equality	Treating each other as thinking peers, Giving equal turns and attention
Feelings	Allowing sufficient emotional release to restore thinking
Information	Supplying the facts, Dismantling denial
Diversity	Welcoming divergent thinking and diverse group identities
Place	Creating a physical environment that says back to people, “You matter”

I gratefully acknowledge Nancy Kline’s work in this area in making this article possible.

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