

The Thinking Environment ...

Everything we do begins with thinking. If our thinking is good, our decisions are good, our actions are good, our outcomes are good.

So, what does it take for us to think for ourselves - with rigour, imagination, courage and grace?

After years of observation we have noticed that the single most important factor in whether people can think for themselves well is how they are being treated by the people with them while they are thinking.

Ten behaviours seem to help the most. We call them The Ten Components of a Thinking Environment.

To embody them is to be a Thinking Environment for people around you.

To apply them to the structures of work with people in pairs and groups is to improve the quality of everyone's thinking and of the outcome of every interaction.

A Thinking Environment not only produces the best practical results of people's time together, It also dignifies, lifts, and lets soar the human mind and spirit.

One of the most valuable things we can offer each other
is the framework in which to think for ourselves

The TEN COMPONENTS

1. ATTENTION

- Listening with palpable respect and without interruption

2. EQUALITY

- Treating each other as thinking peers
- Giving equal turns and attention
- Keeping agreements and boundaries

3. EASE

- Offering freedom from internal rush or urgency

4. APPRECIATION

- Offering genuine acknowledgement of a person's qualities
- Practicing a 5:1 ratio of appreciation to criticism

5. ENCOURAGEMENT

- Giving courage to go to the cutting edge of ideas by moving beyond internal competition

6. FEELINGS

- Allowing sufficient emotional release to restore thinking

7. INFORMATION

- Supplying the facts
- Dismantling denial

8. DIVERSITY

- Welcoming divergent thinking and diverse group identities

9. INCISIVE QUESTIONS

- Removing assumptions that limit our ability to think for ourselves clearly and creatively

10. PLACE

- Creating a physical environment that says back to people, "You matter".

Thinking Enhancers

We think best when:

- we know we are respected
- we trust our own intelligence
- our minds are free of fear
- our ideas will affect a specific outcome
- we are seeking the best idea, not trying to win
- people show interest and delight in us
- we have accurate and complete information
- we are in charge and not being exploited
- we are not rushed
- our questions are welcomed
- we are asked incisive questions
- we are engaged in work that expresses our values
- we are in active pursuit of our dreams and goals
- stereotypes and oppressive attitudes are not tolerated
- we are at ease
- we think well of ourselves
- everyone in the group is given a chance to think and speak
- we know specifically how we are appreciated
- the physical environment says back to use, "You matter"
- we are encouraged to think beyond the usual
- our physical bodies are comfortable and respected

Thinking Inhibitors

We think least well when we are in the presence of:

- Ridicule
- Competition
- Intimidation
- Perfectionism
- Cynicism
- Criticism
- Powerlessness
- Self-doubt
- Formality
- Physical discomfort
- Seduction
- Low expectations
- Addiction
- Stereotyping
- Pity

Rounds in a Thinking Environment

Everyone matters.

Regardless of power differentials and hierarchical placement, everyone's thinking matters because getting everyone's best thinking produces best results.

The best way to get the best thinking from everyone is to populate the meeting with systematic uninterrupted Rounds. Rounds increase the generative nature of the group's thinking. Rounds also usually produce superior ideas in less time.

A Round is a simple enough concept, but it requires these four actions from the Chair:

1. Decide first what the question is that people will be addressing in the Round
2. Determine the direction of the Round (clockwise, anti-clockwise)
3. Ask for a volunteer to begin the Round
4. Remind people that no one speaks again until the Round is completed

If you do only one thing to improve the thinking in groups, institute Rounds. And be sure to decide first on the question.

Generative Attention – Transformative Listening

Attention is an act of creation

Attention from one person generates thinking in another person
Listening to ignite is different from listening to reply

Attention is also paradox

When you give Attention of this calibre:

- *You are so present you become invisible*
- *You matter profoundly because you do not matter at all*
- *You do not need to be needed but are needed entirely*
- *You are essential, and you are irrelevant*

In practice:

To be interrupted is not good

To get lucky and not be interrupted is better

But **to know** you will not be interrupted allows you truly to think for yourself

Transformative listening is nearly a work of art. It comes from genuine interest in where the person will go next in their thinking. It comes from your courage to trust their intelligence.

Adopt this attitude and general behaviour as you listen:

- *Settle back*
- *Keep your eyes on the eyes of the person as they speak*
- *Cultivate fascination with what they will say next*
- *Achieve a composure that is wildly dynamic*
- *Do not interrupt*
- *Trust that not uttering a word is one of the most effective things you can do*
- *Know that your job is to help the person think for themselves, not to think for them*
- *Remember that the expression of feelings is often part of the thinking process*
- *Be aware that much of what they say will be the result of your effect on them*

In the quiet presence of your attention, respect and ease, important things can happen for the person thinking. Fresh ideas can emerge; confusion can dissipate; painful feelings can subside; creativity can explode.

It does not matter whether you think you know what the person will say before they say it. Do not interrupt them or stop them. What matters is what happens for them **because they say it.**

Enjoy this expertise. It is subtle, but powerful.