Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind
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The Thinking Environment

Introduction

The Thinking Environment: A Practical Model

words [she probably meant fewer], if you set up the right conditions, people *will* think for themselves.'
'That's it,' I said, humbled.
Create a particular environment, and people will think for themselves. It is that simple.
We can create a thinking environment for each other at any time.

Part One: A Thinking Environment: Its Ten Components
CHAPTER 1: Why a Thinking Environment Matters

The chair then outlined the agenda and began with the clinical trials item. True to the Thinking Environment model, she went round the group, giving everyone a chance to speak before any discussion could begin.

CHAPTER 2: Thinking for Yourself

matter, when was the last time somebody asked you, 'What do you really think, *really?'* and then waited for you to answer at length?

The Ten Components of a Thinking Environment

CHAPTER 3: Attention

**The quality of your attention
determines the quality of other
people's thinking.**

It was because the teaching, handed down to you with all goodwill, that the best help we can be to people is to tell them what to think, is not true. It is popular. It is immediate. But it is wrong.
Real help is different. Real help, professionally or personally, consists of listening to people, of paying respectful attention to people so that they can *access their own ideas first*. Usually the brain that contains the problem also contains the solution — often the best one.

When you keep that in mind, you become more effective with people. And people around you end up with better ideas.

To help people think for themselves, first listen. And listen. Then — listen. And just when they say they can't think of anything else, you can ask them the question, 'What else do you think about this? What else comes to mind that you want to say?' Even when people are sure there is nothing left in their weary brain, there nearly always is. Surprisingly the simple question, 'What else do you think about this?' can usually lead them straight to more, often good, ideas. In the presence of the question, the mind thinks again.

Codependence
is rampant in any structure requiring obedience or conformity.

Quiet
You may well feel awkward when the quiet first sets in. You may have been taught that at times like these you must speak, that you must 'rescue' the person from the apparent mounting embarrassment of having nothing to say. Yet when a person is thinking out loud and suddenly is quiet but is not stuck, the quiet is alive. Neither the person nor the quiet needs rescuing. They need attention only — and more quiet.

Consider how long you think you could bear to be quiet and let someone think out loud. With only the occasional benign murmuring and nod and smile of understanding from you and the occasional question requesting even more thoughts, a person in your presence might just turn into a genius — at least, for that moment.
And they will think you are brilliant. They will thank you. You will feel you did nothing, but you will have given life. Like the sun, you will just have come out and beamed. That was all. And look what happened.

CHAPTER 4: Incisive Questions

The Incisive Question
A question, however, will. A question will get rid of the assumption and replace it with one that frees you to think about what to say to Neil and then say it. A question works because, unlike a statement which requires you to obey, a question requires you to think. The mind seems to prefer to think, not to obey.

However, just any old question won't do. It has to be a question that *accurately* identifies the assumption and then replaces it with the exactly right freeing one. The key is listening with precision.
If I were your colleague, I would be thinking the following things:
- Your assumption is that you are stupid.
- This is an untrue assumption.
- I will remove that assumption by replacing it with a freeing one: you are intelligent.
- I will put that freeing assumption inside a question and link it to your goal of talking to Neil. The question would look like this: *If you knew that you were intelligent* (freeing assumption), *how would you talk to Neil* (goal of the session)?

Three Kinds of Assumptions

Over the years I have collected Incisive Questions that made a difference in people's lives and organizations. Below are some samples. Note that the first part of the question asserts a positive assumption; the second part directs the Thinker's attention back to their issue or goal.

- If you were to become the chief executive, what problem would you solve first, and how would you do it?
- If you knew that you are vital to this organization success, how would you approach your work?
- If things could be exactly right for you in this situation, how would they have to change?
- If you were not to hold back in your life, what would you be doing?
- If you found out that someone you love very much is going to die tomorrow, what would you want to be sure to say to them today?
- If you could trust that your children would be fine, what would you do with the rest of your life?
- If you knew that you are beautiful just as you are, what would change for you?
- If you knew that you are as intelligent as your bosses, how would you present yourself to them?
- If a doctor told you that your life depends on your changing the way you live, what would you do first for yourself?
- If you trusted that your excellence will not put others in your shadow, what would your goals be?

You can identify your own assumptions and create your own incisive questions to remove them in a second.

Group Assumptions

If your team has run out of good ideas, ask yourselves, 'What might we be assuming here that is limiting our thinking on this issue?' And remember the answer, which could be: 'We are assuming that only the top people can think about this well enough.' Then remove it: 'If we knew that we can think about this as well as anybody, perhaps even better, what would our ideas be now?' In other words, notice the problem, find the limiting assumption and replace it with a freeing one.

CHAPTER 5: Equality

**Knowing you will have your turn
improves the quality of your listening.**

CHAPTER 7: Ease

**Ease creates. Urgency destroys.
When it comes to
helping people think for themselves,
sometimes doing means not doing.**

In this society ease is not easy. At least if we are hurrying, we can be seen to be doing something. And doing something is what produces results, isn't it? Not always. Most of the time being, with no rush, is what produces results. Sometimes, and particularly when it comes to helping someone think, doing requires not doing. To pay attention with a heart and mind at ease is what produces results. It is also — and this is almost impossible to remember — what produces time. A case study in London showed that a senior management team achieved time savings of 62 per cent when they ran their team as a Thinking Environment. That translated into 2,304 manager hours per year.

When it comes to thinking, the thing on which everything else depends, ease, that giant unattainable tiny thing, actually generates time we don't have if we rush.

CHAPTER 10: Information, Sometimes

Bad Motives
Supply information only when you are sure that it will make a decisive difference in the direction, content or progress of a person's thinking.

Denial
Questions help to puncture denial. A few powerful ones are:
* What is in my face that I am not facing?
* What is the worst thing that can happen if I face this? What is the worst thing that can happen if I don't?
* What am I assuming that makes me turn away from this?

The Amy Question is: 'What do you already know that you are going to find out in a year?' This question requires you to supply and face your *own* information. Ask it at the beginning of any relationship or enterprise or change.

CHAPTER 11: Place

I realized the appearance is not the key. I began to wonder what two such differently designed and furnished places could have in common. Both had made it hard to think. I asked myself the question, 'What was I assuming while in those two environments that stopped me from thinking well?' The answer surprised me: 'I don't matter here.'

What would have to change about your work space (especially if you are 'hot desking'), or even your home, for it to say back to you, 'You matter'?

CHAPTER 12: Diversity

Women Emulating Men
The inevitable thing about the messages of superiority is that the non-dominant group is taught to revere the very group that is marginalizing it. In particular it is encouraged to take on the dominant group's leadership behavior. As a result, as more and more women have moved into positions of leadership, they have done so by adopting men's conditioning and espousing it as the best way to lead and to have influence. This is not progress. Women have been encouraged

to 'be like men' when actually the best thing for men and society would be to encourage men to 'be like women'.

Part Two: Creating a Thinking Environment
I: The Thinking Organization
CHAPTER 15: Meeting This Way

Giving everyone a turn

Knowing they won't be interrupted

<u>Chairing Brilliant Meetings</u>
If you want people to say of your meetings that 'they just don't get better than this', chair them as a Thinking Environment. As team leader or manager or chair of a meeting, consider following these nine simple guidelines:

At the beginning:
1. Give *everyone a turn* to speak.
2. Ask everyone to say what is *going well* in their work, or in the group's work.

Throughout:
3. Give attention *without interruption* during open and even fiery discussion.
4. Ask Incisive Questions to reveal and *remove assumptions* that are limiting ideas.
5. Divide into *Thinking Partnerships* when thinking stalls and give each person five minutes to think out loud without interruption.
6. Go around intermittently to give everyone a turn to say what they think.
7. Permit also the sharing of truth and *information.*
8. Permit the expression of *feelings.*

At the end:
9. Ask everyone what they thought went well in the meeting and what they respect in each other.

1. **Give everyone a turn**
   Most important of the meeting guidelines is that everyone has returned to speak, several times, knowing they will not be interrupted. The other eight aspects of a thinking meeting are vital, but this feature alone improves the quality of thinking in the group dramatically.

   a) Let the first round be a *positive* reflection of people's work or the work of the project. People think better throughout the whole meeting if the very first thing they do is say something true and positive about how their work or the work of the group is going. But make sure the question is not mushy or superficial. And that you are not either. People resist gush, especially at work. Three good questions are: 'What is going well in your work or life?', 'What successes have you had since we last met?' and 'What do you think is going well in our project?'

Be clear that no one speaks again until everyone has had a turn. Prevent these systematic go-rounds from turning prematurely into a discussion.

a) *First reflect positively on the meeting.*
b) *Then appreciate each other.*

<u>Brainstorming in a Thinking Environment</u>
It is a useful technique because it prevents the thinking inhibitor of judgment. But it is even more effective if you apply it to the standards of a Thinking Environment. Next time someone suggests you brainstorm something, suggest that everyone get a turn in sequence first to put forward an idea. Then open it to random contributions, but do not allow interruption. Then intermittently do another systematic round to hear from everyone. And at least once divide into pairs and give the pair a total of, say, ten minutes to go back and forth between themselves, producing one idea per person.

CHAPTER 17: Presenting This Way

Thinking Environment structure for presentations. It goes something like this:
1. The chair welcomes the presenting team and mentions its successes so far.
2. The presenters make *the entire presentation* before there is any interruption or attack. (If you are confused about something, so confused you can truly not listen to the next sentence, ask for clarification, but only if you are sure the question is not going to be answered in the next sentence or two.)
3. After the presentation is complete, the chair asks first for comments on what was useful from the presentation, demonstrating this by being first to speak.
4. Then the chair encourages questions and discussion, but always *without interruption*.
5. At the end of the meeting, regardless of how much legitimate criticism there has been of the presentation, the chair goes around the group to get honest answers to this question: What do you think has been good in this presentation, and what in particular do you respect in the presenting team?

CHAPTER 19: Change in a Thinking Environment

1. Give correct information about the upcoming changes as soon as you possibly can and as succinctly.
2. Give everyone a turn, in groups or in private, to say how they really feel about the changes.
3. Ask them what ideas they have for adapting. Find out what they might be assuming that could stop them from making a good transition, even if the changes mean their redundancy.
4. Listen, listen, listen.
5. Appreciate their good work.

CHAPTER 21: Leading This Way

Today's leader must prize the minds of people above all else.

Handwritten Notes

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