HOW TO LISTEN SO PEOPLE CAN THINK

'This stunning book is a joyous, life-changing experience of the power of a Thinking Environment.'
~ Nancy Kline

MONICA SCHÜLDT

How to Listen So People Can Think

HOW TO LISTEN SO PEOPLE CAN THINK

The Power of a Thinking Environment®

Monica Schüldt

Lassbo Förlag
www.lassboforlag.se

Cover and graphic design: Emma Bonath
Illustrations: Emma Bonath och Anna Hedman Jernberg.

ISBN: 978-91-990538-0-6

For Nancy,
Who has dedicated her life to this noble quest:
To enable people to think for themselves.

About this book and the value of a Thinking Environment

'I love Monica's book! She is a wonderful storyteller, and her mastery of the Thinking Environment is inspiring.

It is such a practical book too.

The suggested exercises to try and practice – "experiment" – together with "watch out!" and "rubbish bin" all make it fresh and accessible.'

– Fiona Dawe, CBE, Time To Think Faculty

'Since experiencing the Thinking Environment, I have found conventional meetings frustrating and pointless. This beautifully crafted book will help you transform meetings from battlegrounds of interruptions to safe places for co-creating meaningful ideas.'

– Alasdair Skelton, Professor of Geochemistry and Petrology, Stockholm University

'Monica has created something truly special here. This is an invitation to experience the remarkable power of generous human attention and how it frees people to think courageously for themselves.

Through authentic stories drawn from every corner of life – family dinners and boardroom meetings, classroom moments and mentoring conversations – Monica offers us a deeper way of being with each other. Her genuine enthusiasm is contagious as she invites practical ways to make tiny shifts that create opportunities for independent thinking.

Monica playfully weaves together the profound and the accessible. She takes big ideas that could feel overwhelming and presents them with such warmth and lightness that they feel like gifts rather than lessons. Each story becomes a doorway, each practice an opportunity to discover our own capacity for generative attention.

This is a book that speaks to everyone because it honours the fundamental truth that we all long to connect more deeply, to think more freely, and to offer our attention as a form of love. Monica shows us exactly how to do that, one small, beautiful step at a time.'

– Maryse Barak, Time To Think Faculty

'Don't be fooled by how simple it is, because the simple is the ingenious and this is ingenious.'

– Anders Sundin, CEO, IT company Sokigo

'Most of the leadership teams I work with choose to use a Thinking Environment to make better decisions and manage complex issues. It helps them avoid misunderstandings and to deal with challenges more effectively.'

– Per Malmberg, founder and CEO,
Ledarskaparna management consulting

‘Helping your athletes grow is the foundation of leadership in sport. This book offers excellent guidance for coaches who want to support real development.’

– Anders Emanuelson, chair of the Swedish Multisport Federation

‘Sport should be based on joy and inclusion, and give children real influence – principles that are easier said than done. A Thinking Environment has given me, and my part of the sports world, the tools to make that happen.’

– Katarina Eriksson, Secretary General and sports coach

‘A Thinking Environment creates inclusion, better workplaces, and better thinking. I hope many people read this book and try out a Thinking Environment for themselves.’

– Jeanette Forss, Regional Director, Unionen

‘Since we started using Thinking Sessions, we don’t need couples’ therapy or relationship courses.’

– Gunnar Wallin, happily married

‘In a Thinking Environment, brilliant, independent thinking emerges. Powerful conversations take place – where no one interrupts, and listening is at the centre.’

– Karolina Palmberg, certified ICF Coach and mother

One thousand thanks

My number one thinking partner is my husband.

When I ask for time to think, he settles in on the couch, always on the right side, puts his arm on the armrest, and gives me his full attention. Magic happens.

Most of these times, his attention enables me to work things out for myself, with no input from him. When that works, he listens and says nothing. Often it doesn't even take very long.

Bizarrely, I often don't know what I really think until I say it out loud while someone is listening. Sometimes I am surprised by what I actually think.

Every now and then, I want to know what he thinks and when I ask, he will tell me. Usually I don't need his thinking, and when I don't ask, he says nothing.

We have been partners for 33 years now, and ever since we started creating Thinking Environments, Nils has given me an average of two Thinking Sessions a week. That's a lot of Thinking Sessions, and a lot of active love.

Because of you, my life is so much better.

A thousand Thinking Sessions. Thank you.

Contents

APPENDIX:

Introduction

This book is about the Thinking Environment®: behaviours that unleash individual and collective intelligence. Good relationships, independent thinking and far better decisions result. Not only is decision quality improved: the decisions are also more likely to be implemented.

The Thinking Environment was discovered by author and educator Nancy Kline, and is now being used all over the world. (More about Nancy Kline in Appendix 4).

As an organisational consultant and coach with 30+ years' experience of improving leadership, collaboration and communication in businesses, authorities, municipalities and non-profit organisations, I have used many methods. There is no doubt in my mind that Thinking Environment basics are the root source of the greatest successes. Groups unleash collective intelligence, save time and come to better decisions. Group members are more at ease and more engaged. People solve their own problems, even dilemmas that may have burdened them for months or even years, and find solutions to all kinds of issues, from minor annoyances to pivotal life choices. Couples find their relationship more enriching. Conflicts are settled. Young people find their voice and stand tall. Families are better off.

In a Thinking Environment, everyone gets the opportunity to think independently, to say what they really think, and to be heard and respected. In addition to all other benefits, this reduces the risk of dangerous and expensive decisions caused by people holding back what they actually think for fear of being excluded from the group.

Creating a Thinking Environment is also the only sure way I know to turn an organisation's stated values into tangible, lived, work-place reality. In the words of experienced facilitator Alf Hellström, the Thinking Environment provides the structure that creates the culture.

> *The Thinking Environment provides the structure that creates the culture.*
>
> *Alf Hellström*

New thinking and psychological safety

We live in times of great need for new thinking: from individuals, in organisations, and at the societal level. But how can we create the conditions for independent thinking?

Current research highlights psychological safety as an enabler of effective leaders and teams, but one important item is missing from articles and presentations on psychological safety: the crux of how to create it. The answers – the practical approaches – are found in a Thinking Environment.

A Thinking Environment is created by ten behaviours that give people the conditions to think for themselves, with courage, imagination, rigour and grace.

Below is a brief description of these ten behaviours.

Attention

To receive attention from others, with a promise of no interruption, is a profoundly affirmative experience. It also enables the thinker to generate and access new thinking – thinking that would otherwise not be possible.

Equality

Everyone gets the same high-quality attention, the same amount of time, and the same number of opportunities to think.

Knowing that you will have your turn engenders ease, and allows you to focus on the person currently thinking and their ideas, instead of wasting your energy on trying to figure out how to wedge your way into the conversation to make your voice heard.

Ease

Freedom from internal urgency or stress. Ease enables profound, holistic, cutting-edge thinking, that's rooted in *all* of our thinking and *all* of our creativity.

Appreciation

Giving attention to and saying what is going well gives us energy, joy and courage. Taking in what qualities others appreciate in us bolsters self-esteem.

Difference
Welcoming differences of thinking, from different people, different group affiliations and backgrounds, and from within one's self.

Feelings
Thoughts and feelings are intimately intertwined. To enable clear thinking, feelings need to be acknowledged.

Encouragement
If you stop competing and start encouraging each other instead, everyone's thinking will improve. Competition is a thought inhibitor: it makes us focus on winning over each other, instead of joining forces for the best thinking. (Query: how could 'beating each other' ever seem to be a good way to generate excellent thinking?)

Information
Good thinking requires absorbing all relevant facts – not only knowing about them, but really taking them on board. Information also includes what we deny, individually and collectively. What is true, that we pretend doesn't exist? If we recognised fully that it does exist, how would we think?

Place
A place that expresses 'You matter' enables thinking.

The mind lives in the body. To improve conditions for thinking, take good care of the body, both in the moment and longer-term.

Incisive questions

In order to think clearly, we need to replace untrue, limiting assumptions with true and liberating ones. The process looks something like this:

- ☆ What am I assuming that is stopping me from solving this?
- ☆ What could I assume instead, which I think is true and liberating, in order to solve this?
- ☆ If I knew that [the true and liberating assumption], how would I solve this?

Simple steps that make a big difference

This book offers simple steps that make a big difference.

Each chapter focuses on one aspect of a Thinking Environment, tells stories from working life and personal life, and suggests one or more experiments to try out, in order to see what difference they make.

The first chapter, 'Stop Interrupting', is fundamental to everything else. Once you have read that, explore whatever catches your interest.

I hope you enjoy the book and find value in the experiments.

Stop interrupting

Rarely do we get to finish what we are saying and thinking, and for this, we pay a high but invisible price. Interrupting drives armoured cars through thinking, damages relationships, diminishes people, and prevents clear and creative thinking.

> *Interruption is an act of violence.*
>
> *Nancy Kline*

Closer than ever

'My partner and I are closer than ever,' said Erica, blushing. Erica and Robert have been a couple for more than 30 years.

'I wasn't going to tell you,' she continued, the fiery blush extending down her throat.

She was quiet for a while and we kept listening. We were, of course, dying to know what had happened, but we didn't say anything and we didn't need to, because Erica continued:

'I stopped interrupting him.'

Now, several years later, Erica still makes an effort not to interrupt Robert. They are both happier and the relationship, which has always been good, is even better than it used to be.

Let the patient finish speaking

Doctor Staffan Wilén used to say that if you let the patient finish speaking, it will, on average, take 2.5 minutes. As a result of saying all they want to say, the patient is more likely to be correctly diagnosed and treated, is less likely to need to come back, and the doctor will be less stressed. Staffan used to teach this to medical students and then put the candidates in a role-play where one was the patient and the other was the doctor.

'It used to take 30 seconds before the "doctor" interrupted,' said Staffan. 'When I asked them why they interrupted, they would say: *I thought I had all the information I needed*.'

We listen to each other

When Joakim Crafoord was Head of Radiology at Ersta Hospital in Stockholm, he and his management team decided on new ground rules.

'We've created a culture of listening well to each other,' said Joakim, 'and if we can keep that up, we've achieved something really valuable.'

I was both delighted and moved by what they had managed to create.

Then I started to consider the alternative: what they were moving away from. That made it even more interesting.

'We sit in meetings all day talking, but we don't listen to each other.' Sound familiar?

Why even call it a meeting, if people aren't listening to each other? What are we all doing there anyway? Why don't we all just go back to our desks, patients or bulldozers and do something more productive?

Attention is key

We're used to interrupting. It's part of our culture; it's how we interact with one another.

The other night I was watching an episode of a TV show on family relationships and counting the interruptions. In a single minute, the participants managed to interrupt each other eight times. Communication? I don't think so.

We all have the ability to give attention. We have it, and we can give it away. But until we give it away and notice the results, we don't fully understand what a dynamic force one person's respectful, interested attention has for another human being.

To give attention is a way of being in the world. It is something you can choose to do and something you can practice, just like some people practice running or playing the piano. When you exercise, you develop the 'muscle' to give undivided, respectful, interested, and appreciative attention.

To stop interrupting requires constant practice, and most of us never grow perfect. But it has such enormous value that it's worth working to hone your skill, every day.

Listening to reply?

There is a crucial difference between:
listening so that you can figure out what to say
and
listening so that the other person can keep thinking for themselves

They are actually not the same thing at all. And they have completely different effects.

While others are speaking, we tend to be focused on what we are going to say when it's our turn. As a result, we are not listening well, so we aren't enabling their finest thinking. Furthermore, our thinking will not be building on theirs, because we aren't paying full attention. Clearly, we are wasting time.

We also interrupt others and say what we think they are going to say – or something we think is even better.

To listen with your full attention – to stay interested because you actually want to know what the other person will soon come up with – is crucial to success with every single experiment in this book.

> *To be interrupted is bad.*
> *To get lucky and not be interrupted is better.*
> *But to* ***know*** *we will not be interrupted*
> *allows us truly to think for ourselves.*
>
> *Nancy Kline*

Levelling up – dealing with interruption

Karl kept interrupting one of his younger colleagues on the management team. Furthermore, and in spite of clear instructions about how important it is not to interrupt and to give everyone equal time, he also took up a disproportionate amount of air space.

‘Hang on a second,’ said Diana Sendlak Brundin, who was facilitating the group.

That was all she had to say, because Karl responded immediately:

‘You think I’m talking too much.’

Diana looked at him and, based on more than 20 years’ professional experience, she decided that she would risk it.

‘Yes, I do. We’ve talked about sharing the time equally. So, in view of the component on assumptions, what do you think about yourself, that makes you think you should have more airtime than others?’

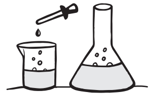
‘He went a bit stiff,’ continues Diana, ‘and so did the others. Then he started laughing. And then the others started laughing too.’

In this group, one person chose to take up more space than the others, and another chose to hold back. ‘It’s about patterns. If you don’t break up the patterns, they will stay the same,’ says Diana.

Diana is one of Sweden’s most experienced Thinking Environment facilitators. Under her direction, the group has learned the value of everyone finishing their thinking. Psychological safety has improved greatly and so has decision quality.

Most of the time, gentle ways of interrupting the interrupter are preferable. See section ‘Watch out!’ on page 69.

EXPERIMENT

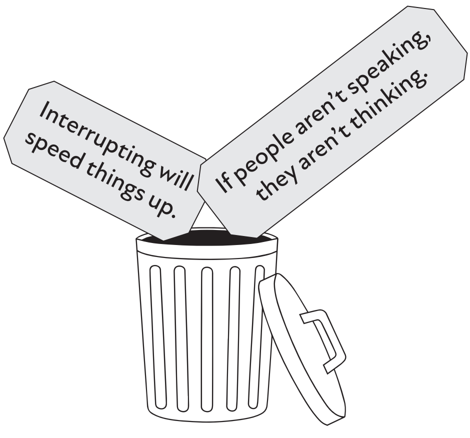


Stop interrupting. Let people finish.

Check how long you manage not to interrupt. Did you manage not to interrupt until 8 am? 9 am? If you manage to get through until lunchtime without interrupting, I'm impressed. If you can get through the whole day, let me know and I will send you a diploma.

What happens for you? How does it affect others? What happens to the quality of decisions?

Rubbish bin



Give someone time to think

If I give you my best attention and promise not to interrupt, you are likely to come up with a good way forward under your own steam. Since the result will be firmly rooted in your own thinking, it will suit you better than anything I might suggest, and you are more likely to use it.

Insight after three and a half minutes

At the restaurant, people turned their heads and stared at us. We just couldn't stop laughing.

At the start of lunch, our mood had been far from happy. Ulla was having problems with her boss and her face had the scrunched-up look of a raisin. 'I have been thinking and thinking, for weeks on end,' she said, 'but I don't know what to do.'

'Would you like me to listen to you while you think?' I asked.

'I'd love that!' said Ulla. She knew that I wouldn't say anything at all until she asked for a question, that I would be completely focused on her and on what she was thinking, and that I would be thinking 'You're so clever' or 'This is so interesting'.

Ulla started talking. Or rather, she began to think out loud. I listened. Three and a half minutes later we started laughing.

Because Ulla had figured out what to do.

Listening with your whole body

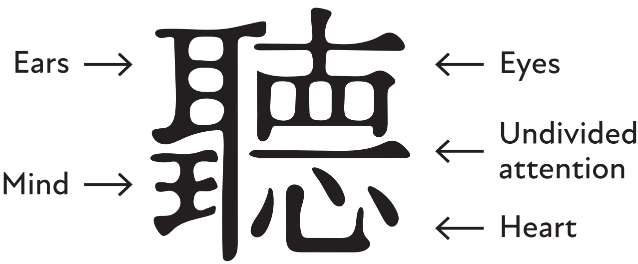
Many years ago, someone gave me a compliment that I have never forgotten: 'You listen with your whole body.' Perhaps that's why I love to create contexts where people really listen to each other?

The Chinese character for listening is not just an ear. Most of us can hear from birth, but that doesn't mean that we are good at listening.

Perhaps one of the most abominated phrases in the English language is: 'I hear what you're saying.' In the reeds lurks the relentless sequel '… but ….' Which is how we know that the other party was never the least bit interested in us, or in what we had to say.

Listening well goes way beyond hearing.

My colleague Michael Cahill, who regularly blows my mind with out-of-the-box thinking and insight, taught me the components of the Chinese character for listening.



When we really listen, we listen from the heart.

Several inches taller

Emma got to her feet. 'Now I know what to do,' she said.

'Let me know if you need anything else,' said the coach, Karolina Palmberg, somewhat rattled by the speed at which things were moving.

'I don't think that will be necessary,' said 15-year-old Emma confidently.

They had met four times. The first three times they had talked about all that was going on with friends, love life (or not), school, sports, family and so on. The life of a 15-year-old can be crawling with tricky issues. The fourth time was Emma's time to think for herself. Giving her full attention and saying nothing, the coach counted on her fingers how many times she asked the question 'What more do you think, or feel, or want to say?' When she had got to 'eight' Emma got to her feet. She was done. Quite done.

The coach wrote to the mother: 'Let me know if you need anything else.'

The mother wrote to the coach: 'I don't think that will be necessary' and 'She's grown several inches.'

Thanks for a great conversation! – 1

'What a great conversation! Thank you!' The radiologist put the phone down.

At the other end of the line, his boss Johan Henriksson smiled.

Johan is good at his job. He's a skilled doctor and a kind and much appreciated manager. When others are uncertain, they tend to give him a call and ask what he thinks, and he's always willing to help. A while back, he decided to try a different approach.

'Sure, I'm happy to tell you what I think, but what do you think?' he said. Then he listened. And listened some more, until the other radiologist had said everything he thought and everything he could come up with. And then Johan said, 'Sounds good. I agree.'

And that was when the other doctor thanked him for a great conversation.

Thanks for a great conversation! – 2

'How nice to talk to you! What a lovely conversation,' said her Mother-in-law.

Christina's mother-in-law phones from time to time. Quite often actually. Much more frequently than Christina needs for her to call. Her mother-in-law is old and lonely and often complains about how hard, dull and sad everything is. Christina has tried and tried to lift her mother-in-law's spirits, get her to look on the bright side, do something enjoyable, think about people who have come to visit, remember that spring is coming soon, or that there will be a party at the weekend. Nothing has helped.

A few months ago, Christina decided not to come up with any more suggestions, but just to listen and occasionally say just enough for her mother-in-law to know that she was still there.

For the first time since her father-in-law died, her mother-in-law sounded happy when she ended the conversation. And that was when she said:

'How nice to talk to you! What a lovely conversation.'

Listening your way to the deal

Nervously, the three sales reps stood outside the door. They were there to get a big contract, but nothing had been decided. On the other side of the door presided Mr Big, whose word was everything.

'Let's do what they taught us on the course,' said Smith.

'What do you mean?' said Brown.

'The Thinking Environment course,' answered Smith. 'Let's listen and not say anything. Let's give him our undivided attention.'

Brown and Jones nodded.

Forty minutes later they were back outside the door, clutching a billion-dollar contract.

The names are obviously pure fiction, but the story is true. Smith, Brown and Jones represented a major systems corporation and they returned to base with a hefty contract.

This story is about selling systems, but the approach is equally valid in other contexts. How do you convince people? How often does more information help? How often is it better simply to listen?

Leadership by listening

The newly appointed head of a U.K. police district was going crazy. The police radio in the room next door kept ringing and ringing and ringing to reach senior officers.

Then management attended a Thinking Environment course and realised that they could stop telling people what to do, and instead give patrolling policemen the chance to think for themselves.

Suddenly a conversation on the radio might sound like this:

'I think there is something wrong at number 47. I'm standing outside the door. What should I do?'

Silence, with attentive listening.

'I think I'll have to break down the door.'

Continued silence with attentive listening. 'I'm breaking down the door.' 'Great, go ahead.'

Eighteen months later, the corridors at police headquarters were quiet. The radio would ring every now and again, but rarely. Resources were saved, management was less stressed, and at the same time, the job of policing the streets became more enjoyable, since officers felt trusted to exercise their judgment.

How long can people keep thinking?

21 secs ———————————————— 4 hours

With undivided attention and using two questions only, I once listened to somebody for four hours (with appropriate breaks). The questions: 'What do you want to think about and what are your thoughts?' and 'What more do you think, or feel, or want to say?' At the end of that time, Erik Gustafsson was quite clear in his own mind about how he was going to approach his new assignment as regional manager at Hifab.

When he was quite done, I asked 'Is there anything else you want from me?' I am a consultant and (still) believe that people expect me to say something that is more valuable to them than what they have just figured out for themselves. I *know* it isn't true, but somehow, I still seem to believe it. (I obviously need to think about that). 'No,' he answered, 'not unless you think I was barking up the wrong tree entirely.' And of course I didn't think so.

'Coaching' with two questions and undivided interest.

The shortest thinking session I have experienced so far was 21 seconds. We had set a timer for five minutes, which is how I know that she was done in 21 seconds. We laughed that time too, Ulla and I.

Same question – new thinking

Don't be silly, surely you can't ask the same question over and over again: 'What more do you think, or feel, or want to say?' Won't they think you're a total idiot?

No, they won't.

The last time you asked that question, their thinking was in a completely different place. Their thinking keeps moving on. And so, the question seems new, because it's new in the place where they are now.

Don't I have to *say* something – to show that I am interested? Or to help them?

Nope.

They will see in your eyes and notice from your way of being that you are interested. If you start thinking about something else – such as whether you are about to run out of milk or what to do over the weekend – people tend to notice. If you start considering what questions you could ask them, or what great ideas you have for solving the problem, *you stop giving them your full attention*.

If you are focused on your ideas, you cannot be focused on them. Focusing on one thing at a time is what our brain needs in order to be its magnificent best. We are simply not able to give real attention to two things at once.

The thinker tends to notice if we are not giving them our full attention, and then *they do not think as well*. If the person who is thinking falls silent, you may want to check whether you were giving them your full attention just before the line went dead.

When they are new to it, people may find it difficult to think for themselves. They will get over it. Thinking for yourself will become a habit they don't want to live without.

In a Thinking Environment, many people discover for the first time in their lives that they are able to think for themselves. The more they use that ability, the more they find they can rely on it, both to solve everyday issues and to shape their own lives.

The two freedoms of the thinker

Freedom to think in silence

The thinker doesn't need to say anything. Many people like to be quiet for part or even all of the time. An artist who was given time to think loved that she was free to think in images and that she didn't have to put her thoughts into words. For me, silence gives me the opportunity to explore whether a thought that pops up in my mind really is what I think – to make sure that it is – before I put the thought into words.

Freedom from questions

The thinker decides whether questions should be asked during the thinking session and the listener – the Thinking Partner – can also promise never to ask whether the thinker has acted on their thinking. The thinker is always free to talk about what they have done or what has happened, but the listener will not ask. When the thinker knows that they will not be held to account in any way, they are free to think for themselves, to put ideas into words, to walk around the ideas and look at them from different angles, to think and feel and savour them and then, perhaps much later, decide whether the ideas should be used – or not.

Thinking Pairs

In a Thinking Pair, two people give each other equal time to think. One person at a time thinks about an issue of their choice while the other person gives their full attention. (Occasionally, one or both don't know what they want to think about when the pair meets, but when the Thinking Partner, i.e. the person who is to listen, asks: 'What do you want to think about and what are your thoughts?' an issue to think about tends to turn up.)

You don't need to go on a course, and you don't even have to be an adult to be a Thinking Partner. Once, when I urgently needed to think about something, I asked my then 15-year-old daughter to listen to me while I was thinking. She listened, I solved my problem and when we were done, she looked happy and said that she felt proud to be my thinking partner.

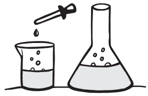
Regular thinking sessions are an effective way to be at your best as a leader, team member and human being. Many organisations set aside half an hour or an hour one or two mornings a week for everyone to have time to think. Not only does this resolve many issues: it also reduces stress and anxiety. Karen de Villiers, divisional manager of a major corporation, schedules Thinking Pairs twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays at 7.30-8 am, and resolves her most important work issues.

The better you are at giving your full attention,
the fewer times you will need to say anything.

Just because people have stopped talking
it doesn't mean that they have stopped thinking.

Know that you are contributing, even though you aren't saying anything. A safe place to think is one of the most precious gifts we can give one another.

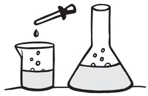
EXPERIMENT – LISTEN WHILE SOMEONE THINKS



- Ask someone if they want you to listen to them while they are thinking. When someone asks you for advice, ask what they think.
- Switch off anything that might disturb and interrupt, such as computers and cell phones. If possible, shut the door. People think on a completely different level when they *know* that they will not be interrupted.
- If suitable, tell them that you will not say anything at all until they say that they are finished and that, if they say they are finished or that they need something from you, you will probably be asking: 'What more do you think, or feel, or want to say?' Make sure that you can 'hear the commas' – that there is a little pause after 'think, ... feel,'.
- Ask: 'What would you like to think about and what are your thoughts?' That simple question focuses the thinker's attention. It can make a big difference.
- Listen as though you are about to discover the innermost secrets of the universe. Be fascinated by their thinking, and by the wonderful, brilliant person in front of you. Or think of a quality in them that you appreciate. Keep your eyes on theirs – in our culture that's a way of showing that we're interested. The person thinking is likely to move their eyes around a lot, but when they return from their thinking excursion, there you will be, with your eyes on theirs, giving them your full attention. This will give them fresh energy so that they can continue thinking.

How did it go? Did the Thinker make headway with their question?

EXPERIMENT – THINKING PAIRS



- Invite a friend or colleague to try Thinking Pairs.
- As your starting point, use the experiment above: 'Listen while someone thinks.'
- Promise to give each other full attention, not to interrupt and not to comment (unless the thinker specifically asks for the listener's thoughts).
- Promise each other not to tell anyone else what the thinker has been thinking, and also never to ask the other about the Thinking Session, or what happened afterwards as a result of it. The thinking is the property of the thinker. We think all the time. Knowing that they will never be held accountable in any way for what they say in a Thinking Session allows the thinker even greater freedom to think for themselves.
- Share the time so that you get equal amounts of time to think.
- When one person is finished, ask: 'Would you like to write anything down?'
- When you are both done, appreciate a quality in each other (see the next chapter).

How did it go? Did you make headway with your issue? Did your Thinking Partner get anywhere with theirs? Have you got the taste for it and want to try the experiment again, perhaps once a week? What did it feel like to appreciate a quality in the other and to be appreciated? How did that affect your feeling about the session?

Watch out!

People think well when they *want* to think. The fact that you think it would be good for them isn't enough: they have to want to think.

Surrounded by Einsteins

When someone is really listening, how often do you think people solve their own problems? Seriously, how often do you think they do? In my experience, at least 50 per cent of the time and I think the true figure is at least 80 per cent.

It seems that the better quality of attention that people get, and the safer they feel, the better they think. So if people don't seem to be able to solve their own issues without your telling them what to do, then it may not be because they are stupid.

If you give them your full attention, you may end up surrounded by Einsteins.

Rubbish bin

Appreciate someone

'I wish I'd said something to him while he was still alive.' We appreciate each other a great deal more than we say. Saying what we appreciate in each other not only makes people happier and improves our relationships: it improves thinking as well. In addition, something wonderful happens to the person who gives appreciation.

Ceasefire

Two brothers, Jacob, 13, and Simon, 10, compete with each other. They argue and squabble, correct each other and say mean things to each other more or less all day long. To say that it gets tiresome is to understate the case. Jacob, who looks set to become a professor, keeps trying to get his sunny and carefree little brother to toe the line.

At dinner one day, their grandmother had had enough. She asked them to appreciate a quality in each other.

'I appreciate that he's stupid,' said Simon.

'I appreciate that he's useless,' said Jacob.

Granny intervened.

‘No, stop, something you *really* appreciate. And say it *to* each other.’

‘I appreciate that he knows everything,’ jeered Simon.

Not to be outdone, Jacob appreciated ‘that he always messes up my stuff.’

But their grandmother still refused to give up.

‘I’m serious. What do you appreciate about Jacob knowing everything?’

‘He’s very good at computer games, and sometimes he helps me when I’ve got stuck.’

‘So you appreciate that he is knowledgeable and helpful, is that right?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can you say to Jacob that you appreciate that he is knowledgeable and helpful?’

Wringing water from a stone may be easier, but the time for miracles is still with us.

‘I appreciate that you are knowledgeable and helpful.’

‘Jacob, what is a quality that you appreciate in Simon?’

‘He’s happy – most of the time. And enthusiastic.’

‘Can you tell him?’

‘I appreciate that you’re happy and enthusiastic.’

So?

Both boys were kind to each other for the rest of the meal. Peace settled around the table and the boys even seemed happier for the rest of the evening. Even on the following day, the effect was palpable.

100 per cent respect

When YouthNet won the 'Best Charity to Work For' award, Fiona Dawe was delighted, surprised and puzzled. 'How did you manage that?' asked an organisational development consultancy. Since Fiona was the CEO, you might have thought that she would know, but she didn't. So she decided to find out.

YouthNet conducted its first staff survey. The response rate to such surveys tends to be low, but because people liked the place where they worked, more than 90 per cent responded.

'100 per cent of those who completed the survey said that they respected their colleagues and felt respected by their colleagues,' says Fiona Dawe.

How do you create a workplace like that? Several things contribute to it, in fact everything you will find in this book, and then some. A key factor is to give each other appreciation. Frequently. Appreciation that is sincere, specific, and succinct.

Giving appreciation, and ensuring that appreciation is present in a range of contexts such as meetings and presentations, contributes to a culture of appreciation. Unsurprisingly, people feel safer and prefer to be where they feel appreciated.

'And it doesn't have to be big and formal, it can be that we bump into each other and one person goes: "You know, I always love your perfume and your energy",' says Fiona.

'Which doesn't mean that it's woo woo la la, because when you know that you're respected you can say what you think, and actually, sometimes, that meant being extremely challenging with one another in terms of saying what you think.'

Appreciation balances the tough stuff, making it possible to create the good – and effective – workplace.

And no, it doesn't have to be a charity. When I took on responsibility for a tiny café on the outer edges of the Stockholm archipelago, I consciously looked for positive qualities I could appreciate in the young people I was working with. Their faces lit up. They gave me appreciation back. And the happy and committed atmosphere in that café was unmistakable.

Why not a behaviour?

Why appreciate a quality rather than a behaviour? Shouldn't you appreciate what people *do*? For twenty years, I had been teaching that when you give feedback, you should describe behaviour.

When it comes to 'constructive feedback', i.e. when you are talking about what is *not* working well, it is crucial to describe the behaviour and not to make any value judgments.

But when it comes to the positive, there is more value in talking about qualities, because the recipient can carry the appreciation with them to other situations. In addition, it seems to go in deeper and give much greater value if you appreciate a quality. 'You are so …' (… brave, wise, committed, clever, funny, enthusiastic, strategic, loving, caring, insightful, creative, resourceful, kind, artistic, attentive, inspiring, analytical, adventurous, full of curiosity, brilliant, exuberant …).

Thanking is not the same as appreciating a quality. 'Thank you' doesn't go as deep and doesn't boost the recipient in other situations. Perhaps this is because a 'thank you' requires you to do something first, in order to merit the thanks, whereas appreciation is given because you are you?

Five times more appreciation than criticism

If you give someone the same amount of criticism as appreciation, you might think that they would balance each other out. The far more likely result, however, is that the recipient will feel worthless. Why? Because criticism makes a far stronger impression than appreciation does. Could this be why so many people feel unappreciated, even though their boss or partner thinks they have given them loads of appreciation? (I had written 'positive feedback', but 'feedback' has become so charged with negative connotation that the mere mention of the word makes many people shut down and run for cover).

If the recipient is to feel even close to being appreciated, the amount of appreciation needs to be far greater than the amount of criticism. Aim for at least 5 to 1. And that is a bare minimum.

Watch out!

A word of warning. Occasionally, people 'appreciate' qualities that they don't appreciate at all, just to get at each other, like Jacob and Simon in the first story. I have known this to happen in a work context as well.

If you are present when that happens, you can ask the recipient, for example: 'How do you feel about that?' Or 'How does that sit with you?'

A completely different caution is that in some cultures, appreciation should be given to a group, not an individual. If such a culture is the context, culture (obviously) rules.

Delusions of grandeur?

But if people are given all this appreciation, won't they get too full of themselves? Surely you have to tell them what they need to improve?

There are still those who believe that people grow lazy if they are appreciated and that criticism makes people work harder and become smarter. Yes, it is time for them to wake up.

Maryse Barak, who travels the world as an organisational consultant to major corporations is also sometimes faced with the objection: 'But why should I appreciate them? They're just doing what they're paid for!'

'We all want to do something that is of value, we want to contribute and we want to be seen, heard and affirmed,' says Maryse.

'When you notice how a person actually contributes with his or her way of being – their integrity, their drive, their sense of humour, or whatever it is – and you say so, something completely different happens.'

Start young

Elin Ljung is a primary school teacher who adores her pupils and I am sure the children in her class know how very kind their teacher is.

In the spring semester, she asked her pupils to write an appreciation of another pupil in the class.

'They wrote such lovely things. It was wonderful, and the children thought so too,' says Elin.

Doesn't it get repetitive?

If you are a small group that meets often, you may find it difficult to find new things to say.

But it is possible. Katarina Eriksson, now Secretary General of the Swedish Cheerleading Federation, and I have talked to each other on average once a week for ten years, while she was busy masterminding a sports club from twelve girls and one coach to more than 400 athletes and 50 coaches. Time and time again we have thought together about the many challenges along the way.

Ten years on, Katarina and I still appreciate a quality in each other every time we talk. In order to manage this, we think about what we especially appreciate in each other right *now*, when we have had *this* conversation. And even though our relationship has been rock-solid for years, it boosts us a fraction every time.

A compliment you have never forgotten?

Sometimes I ask people: 'What is a compliment you have never forgotten?' Peder Karlsson answered:

'When I was a kid, a friend of my mother's said to me: "Peder, you have such a lovely voice." I've never forgotten that.'

Ok, so what? Peder Karlsson – who is he?

Peder became a singer, co-founded vocal group The Real Group, setting a new fashion in vocal music, and travelled the world, performing to enthusiastic audiences. When I first heard The Real Group live a number of years ago, I thought, 'I had no idea music could be so harmonious.'

Peder has such a lovely voice.

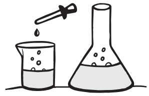
Long term

'I love the focus on appreciation in a Thinking Environment,' says Jeanette Forss, regional manager of a Swedish trade union. 'The energy it brings to the group is invaluable. So easy to do and at the same time so hard to remember to do. It lifts me up when I receive appreciation and when I give appreciation to colleagues and friends around me.'

In the fifteen years that I have been creating a Thinking Environment I have probably been given more appreciation than in the first 50+ years of my life. It makes me stronger and more confident. It increases my sense of self-worth. It makes me happier and more creative. It gives me energy and makes me more willing to try new things. In groups, it makes people more at ease. Not only that: giving appreciation leaves a wonderful feeling in the giver. Everybody wins.

I once asked Nancy Kline how she discovered the importance of the different components of the Thinking Environment. Regarding appreciation, she said that she had noticed that when people are criticised, they stop thinking independently. (Obviously, we can have different opinions – that is not the same thing as criticising each other). She and others also noticed that if they expressed their appreciation for each other, they thought better. They could relax because they could remember what the other person had said that they respected. When they didn't say what they appreciated, they didn't think as well and as independently.

EXPERIMENT – GIVE APPRECIATION



- ➢ Choose somebody you want to give appreciation: a colleague, someone in your family, a friend – anyone. Even people we are not fond of usually have some positive quality.
- ➢ What is a quality in them that you appreciate? Make sure that you genuinely mean what you are going to say.
- ➢ Find a good time and say it.

Did they look happy? Embarrassed? Did they respond by giving you some appreciation?

Do it again, with a new quality. And again. How does it affect your relationship? How does it affect your collaboration?

Many find it difficult to put appreciation into words, because we are simply not used to appreciating qualities in each other. For some inspiration, have a look at the end of this chapter.

Receiving appreciation

Here are the three A's for how to receive appreciation:

- ☆ Accept – receive the gift (rather than brushing it off).
- ☆ Acknowledge – 'Thank you.'
- ☆ Allow – let it sink in.

Do you find it hard to receive appreciation? Do you find it embarrassing or difficult to believe that it really is true and genuinely meant? Might you be assuming something that is stopping you from receiving the appreciation? If so, see page 113, 'What am I assuming'.

If you don't take in appreciation that is given to you, or if you brush it off with a quick comment, it's almost as if you are throwing the gift in the face of the giver.

Rubbish bin

Levelling up

Once you have become used to appreciating a quality, you can start painting pictures of appreciation: 'Your enthusiasm is like a sparkling fountain.'

Qualities to appreciate

Some examples. There are plenty more out there.

Alert	Dedicated
Adventurous	Determined
Analytical	Diligent
Artistic	Diplomatic
Astute	Effective
Attentive	Efficient
Balanced	Encouraging
Brilliant	Engaged
Careful	Enterprising
Caring	Entertaining
Charismatic	Enthusiastic
Charming	Exuberant
Cheerful	Fast
Clever	Flexible
Collaborative	Focused
Committed	Frank
Conscientious	Friendly
Considerate	Full of good ideas
Convincing	Full of respect
Creative	Funny

Goal-oriented	Persistent
Good at seeing different perspectives	Perspicacious
Good at seeing things through	Practical
Holistic	Productive
Honest	Prudent
Independent	Realistic
Innovative	Reliable
Insightful	Resourceful
Inspiring	Sense of humour
Interested	Sense of proportions
Inventive	Serene
Kind	Sincere
Knowledgeable	Smart
Logical	Solutions-oriented
Loving	Strategic
Loyal	Supportive
Meticulous	Trusting
Motivating	Trustworthy
Musical	Versatile
Observant	Visionary
Open	Warm
Out-of-the-box	Wise

Ask a question

As soon as the mind hears a question, it gets to work. A question focuses thinking and saves time.
If a question is asked in advance, thinking may already have got underway before a group meets up. Instead of an hour, the meeting may take 30 minutes and the outcome is likely to be far better.

Questions drive engagement

‘You *have* to do something about the meetings,’ said the deputy chair.

‘Why? What’s wrong with the meetings?’ asked the chair, ‘we’ve had the same agenda for years.’

‘They never go anywhere. And they’re so boring it makes reading the bus time table seem like fun,’ replied the deputy chair, who was planning to resign at the first available opportunity.

I wonder why?

Agenda
1§ welcome and apologies for absence
2§ attendance
3§ approval of minutes of the previous meeting
4§ approval of the agenda
5§ treasurer’s report (Cecilia)
6§ communication strategy (Gabriel)
7§ recruitment of new members (Peter)
8§ any other business
9§ next meeting

What is wrong with this agenda?

Or, put differently, do you feel the urge to attend? Does it seem interesting? Does it excite or inspire you?

Cecilia, Gabriel and Peter each have some responsibility at this meeting, but what are all the other people doing there?

What is the purpose of this meeting? What result are we hoping for, something that is worth the time we are spending on it?

What if the agenda for the same meeting read like this instead:

1. What in our work engages you?
2. How can we raise £10,000 for the youth initiative?
3. How can we use communication to increase membership numbers by 50 per cent?
4. How do you think we can get three more people involved in our work?
5. What is one thing that has been valuable about the meeting and what is a quality you appreciate in the colleague on your left?

The brain thinks best when it is asked a question. If you want the best thinking from others, at formal meetings or in everyday life, at home or at work: try asking a question. It can be anything from 'How do you think we can double sales while maintaining profitability' to 'How do you think we can have a great holiday?'

Sending out the agenda – or letting people know the question/-s – well ahead of time, will enable those who like time to think to be prepared for the meeting.

Staircase

From another agenda comes the following item: 'Staircase'.

Staircase. What do you mean, 'Staircase'? Do we need to repaint it? Redesign it so that it harmonises with the building? Enable access for the disabled? Get someone to put gravel on it so that people don't slip in the winter? What is the question behind the item? What do we want people to think about? As soon as the mind is asked a question it gets going. Faced with a statement like 'Staircase' nothing much happens.

What question?

What question you ask depends on what kind of result you want. Are you looking for new ideas? A decision? Implementation of a previous decision? Do you need to update each other? Do you need to talk about how you feel? When you are clear about what outcome you are after, you can work out a question that can take you there.

Supposing you want to gather your family to think about this year's holiday. Do you already know the purpose of the holiday? Should you get together to think about 'What would be an exciting holiday for us all?' Or 'What would be a relaxing holiday for us all?' Or should you just start off with 'What do you want from our holiday this year?' and carry on with 'How do we achieve that?'

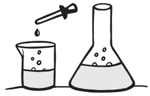
Watch out

Before you ask, make sure that you really want everyone's thinking about whatever the question is. Health and safety warning: if you have already made up your mind, do not ask (or be prepared to run for cover when you have asked). People will notice that you are not genuinely interested in what they think and they will be justly furious.

I once asked my daughter what she thought about something, in the hope that she would come to the conclusion that I had already drawn. She came up with something completely different, and when she realised that I didn't think her idea was acceptable, she quite rightly flipped her lid: 'Why do you ask, if you've already made up your mind?'

Time and time again, I have seen exactly the same phenomenon in organisations. 'He asks, but he doesn't listen, because he's already made up his mind.' A sure-fire way to get people to stop engaging. So, when you ask a question, make sure you really want to know what others think.

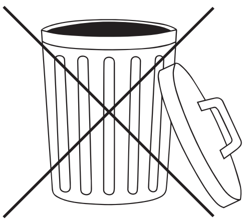
EXPERIMENT

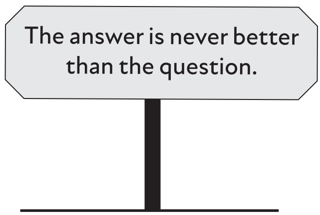


- Choose a topic on which you would like to know what other people think.
- Figure out who should be invited. Who can contribute on this issue?
- Phrase the item as a question. The question should be directed toward the purpose: what do I want to achieve at this time? Why am I raising this now? Do I want to find alternatives? Do I want to gain support? Do I want to make a decision? Do we need new ideas for solutions? Do I want us to agree? The wording of the question matters.

Listen to what people think. They may surprise you.

Not for the rubbish bin





Do a Round

When everyone gets the same amount of time, knows that they will not be interrupted, and everyone is really heard, outcomes improve, sometimes immeasurably. You also save a lot of time and energy.

> *'Not giving everyone a turn is like running a four-cylinder engine on two cylinders.'*
>
> *Roy Bartilson, Ledarskaparna AB*

> *'If one person talks a lot, it's always at the expense of somebody else.'*
>
> *Diana Sendlak Brundin, Kvalitencia Ledarskap AB*

'See you in court!' – not

The deputy chair of the housing co-operative was on the verge of bringing in the lawyers.

A construction firm had helped the association convert the attic into a flat, renovate the stairwells and the lift, and quite a number of other items. The work was almost done. Now, all they had to do was approve the quality of the work, and agree on who was going to pay for what. The association had one view, and the construction firm had rather a different one. Sound familiar?

The chair of the association was one of the first people in Sweden to come across a Thinking Environment. He called a meeting with the project manager, two representatives from the association and two from the builder. As soon as they started on the first agenda item the argument grew heated, even though the topic – choice of surveyor – seemed innocuous enough. The discussion quickly side-tracked into uninteresting detail, with people arguing and defending their own position.

'Let's just stop right there for a minute,' said the chair. 'And then let's start from our joint task in this group, that on April 8 we are to have a finished, renovated property ready for inspection, based on the assignment that we've agreed on. That's the starting point for everything.

'And now I'd like us to listen more to each other, so that we understand why it's so important to you, which surveyor we bring in.

'So I'd like us to do a Round around the table,' continued the chair, 'and one person at a time will give their thinking about choice of surveyor. And the rest of us, who are not talking, will just focus on trying to understand. Not on trying to figure out our own arguments.'

One at a time, everyone in the group was given the chance to speak. Then the chair asked: 'So now that we've heard everybody, what is a solution that both parties can agree on?'

'Ten seconds later, we were all agreed.'

'Great, now we have a number of other difficult things to talk about,' continued the chair, 'let's keep going in this spirit and work in the same way. And we'll talk about the costs for the lift and the interior of the lift that we disagree on, and we'll do the same thing again.'

45 minutes later, they had dealt with every single item on the agenda.

'In the last half an hour we just sat around chatting, because we had agreed on everything. Once we had heard everyone's point of view, it was easy. It even got to the point when the builder had explained his take on something that the two of us from the board were going: "But fair's fair, of course you should be paid for that", so he got paid more for certain things and less for others, because he understood our thinking. People got to finish speaking without being interrupted. On a few occasions I checked: "Is there anything more you want to say?" It all got really easy.'

Afterwards, the builder emailed the chair: 'Thanks for a really good meeting. I never thought it would be such smooth sailing.'

'I can think!'

As the COO of a biotechnology company, Alf Hellström taught the value of listening to each other, of not interrupting, and of letting everyone finish their thinking. Since The Royal Swedish Institute of Technology was to study the groups as they were working, everyone had been asked to complete a questionnaire before work started.

At the end of that, one of the team members, Mathias, was miserable because he is dyslexic and filling in the survey had been a real struggle.

Then the conference started. Work was in small groups, and everyone got to speak and was listened to with real interest from everyone else in the group. After one of the sessions, Mathias comes out beaming, and when he sees Alf, he throws his arms up in the air and shouts:

'Alf, Alf, I can think!'

For perhaps the first time in his life he realised that he too is able to think.

Thinking about this story makes me cry, for grief and for joy. Grief, because he is a grown man and that was the first time he realised that he can think. Joy, because he now knows.

Peace settles around the dinner table

Suddenly, the children are saying nice things to each other. They help out around the house and there is peace around the dinner table. What happened?

Adam, 10, Clara, 8, and Maya, 6, have been much like other children: grousing and squabbling about little things and quick to keep out of the way when it is time to help out at home.

Adam and Clara learned to speak when they were very young, and since Dad is also pretty talkative, little sister Maya never had a chance. It was *never* her turn.

So Mum experimented, one step at a time.

Everybody around the dinner table got to say something they appreciated. After a couple of days, Mum and Dad started focusing on the food or the person who had cooked it.

When everyone had learned how to do that, it was time for stage two.

Mum got out a napkin ring and suggested that everyone get their turn to talk about anything they liked, for example what their day had been like. The person who was speaking held the napkin ring. Everyone else promised to give their very best attention to the person who was speaking, and promised not to interrupt. Maya was beyond ecstatic. Everyone was *finally* listening to *her*! She clutched the napkin ring so hard that her little knuckles went white, and she had a hard time letting go of it. Finally, she dared to trust that it would eventually be her turn again, so that she could pass it on.

A few days later, when everyone was used to this, it was time for stage three.

Appreciate a quality in the person on your left. Go around the table so that everyone gets appreciated. Next time, for variation, go round the other way.

Stage four occurred at the supermarket, when a complete stranger asked the mother: 'What have you done to the children?' The mother froze, preparing to defend her children. 'They're so nice to each other,' continued the lady. 'Thanks,' smiled the mother, embarrassed at what she had been thinking.

45-minute reboot

A sports team had lost focus and spark. It was February, and trainings felt about as exciting as last week's chewing gum. Head coach Roxanna de Freitas racked her brains, wondering what she could do to get the team back on track.

She gathered the whole team in a meeting room, set up the conditions for a Thinking Environment, and in Pairs and Rounds let everyone think about the team's goals and what each of them wanted from their training.

'After that, they were so much more engaged and team spirit was so much better,' Rox told me later. 'The effect stayed with them for the rest of the semester, from February to June. And most of the team members chose to apply for the same team next year.'

'Wow,' said I, 'how long did that take?' thinking it must have taken at least a couple of hours, and probably more like half a day.

'Hmmm,' said Roxanna slowly, thinking about it, 'it must have taken … 45 minutes.'

From Katja Fagerström in the far north of Sweden comes the story of a team in which some had already dropped out, and several others were thinking of leaving. 'It was so bad that the coaches weren't sure they would be able to keep going through the term.'

Everyone in the team got to speak and really be listened to in pairs and Rounds on questions like 'How do you feel about the coming term?' 'What do you like about this team?' and 'What would you like the team to focus on this term?' Katja also often asked: 'How do you feel now?'

Even after the first Round, it was clear that most team members wanted to stay on, provided most of the others wanted to keep going. After an hour and a half, the drive to carry on was back in the team. Most proud was probably one of the very youngest members, who rarely said anything, but who now dared to speak out in front of all the others, and who also dared to say that she wasn't sure she wanted to continue, even though the others did. Katja's conclusion: 'It wouldn't have happened without the safety of a Thinking Environment.'

From paralysis to action

What to do when your most important customer suddenly pulls out, and you are about to lose more than half of your turnover? The management team figured it out in 37 minutes.

The management team had been away together for a few days. As they were beginning to wrap it up, a phone call came through from one of their sales people and the bomb exploded.

'Our biggest customer is leaving us. We are about to lose 60 per cent of sales.'

Peter, Jessica, Ada and Madeleine stared at each other. Christian froze, petrified. Oscar thought he was dreaming, and hoped that he would soon wake up. Surely it couldn't be true? Thoughts churned: How is this possible? How will I cope? What will happen to the company? What about the poor people who have worked here all their lives? Now what?

Then realisation dawned: it really was happening. They were about to lose more than half of the business. With that realisation came another worrying thought: *Oh help, we are in charge.*

What their facilitator had taught them the day before suddenly came in handy: how to access collective intelligence, getting everyone's best ideas and thoughts. Ask a question. Let everyone in the team think about the question. Give your full attention. First, promise not to interrupt.

Peter broke the silence.

'Wow, this is really hard,' he said. 'I'm sad for the company and for the staff. I'm worried too.' The group did a Round, sharing feelings. Then it was Peter's turn again.

'How do we save the company?' he asked. 'I want everyone's thinking.'

Peter was used to companies going through tough times and had suffered through one lay-off after another. As far as he was concerned, they clearly had to let go of staff, but he still wanted to hear what everyone else had to say. 'Who wants to start,' he asked, 'then let's go clockwise.'

'I can start,' said Jessica. 'We have to put everything we have into our other customers, make sure of them, and then we have to find two new customers. We have to go full-out on sales so that we don't lose staff. We'll do that anyway, but this way we can avoid losing engagement.

'I'll see what we can do in terms of damage control,' she continued. 'Perhaps we can extend the contract for a few more months, or keep some part of the contract, or cooperate with the new supplier. They may not have the skills they need to take care of this client. We can approach them, and suggest that we can be their subcontractor for six months or a year to give us some leeway. What do you think?' she asked, turning to Oscar, who was sitting on her left.

Oscar shook himself, as if to wake up from a bad dream. He took a deep breath. 'Good ideas! Can we can help with sales? At least it will be easier to talk to the staff if we have done everything we can. What do you think?' he asked Madeleine.

‘Is the door shut?’ asked Madeleine, looking around anxiously, as if the conference room were full of hidden microphones. ‘Perhaps this is our chance to let go some people that we should have eased out ages ago?’ she continued. ‘Adèle has contributed zilch since I talked to her about the way she dresses. She just drifts around and stirs up trouble. Adrian is a nice guy, but seriously useless. I think we have a few more.’

‘I agree,’ said Christian, who had recovered. ‘We have to make a plan for who to let go and how, and with a few people, this is our chance to let them go. I’ll talk to the union reps, so they know that we’re in for a rough patch. And we can check if there are people who want to work part-time, or people who want to take early retirement, so that we don’t have to lay off more people than we absolutely have to. What do you think, Ada?’

Before their days together, Ada had said hardly anything in meetings, but in the last few days she had started to talk, because now, she didn’t have to fight for air space. ‘Couldn’t we speed up product development?’ she said, blushing as the attention turned to her. ‘Product Z is almost ready for market release. Don’t you think we could speed things up, so that we can release it to market? Wouldn’t that help us attract new customers? And why don’t we engage all staff, and get their ideas? Because even if they don’t come up with anything new, I think it’s important that they are involved, so that they know that we have a problem that will affect us all. What do you think, Peter?’

‘What a team we are,’ he said. He summarised all the ideas.

‘Do you agree?’ Everyone nodded.

They decided who would do what.

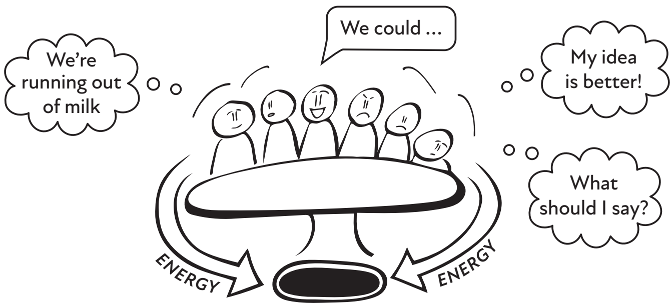
Peter glanced at his watch. They had agreed on a plan and it had taken them 37 minutes.

Round – isn't that the same as letting everyone have a say?

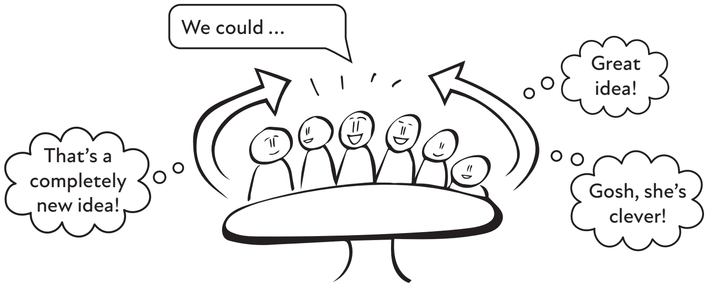
Letting everyone have a say is nothing new. Isn't this the same thing?

No.

There is a crucial difference, which is: where is your attention? When you 'let everyone have a say' people may listen to others, but their attention is usually not with the speaker. Most listeners are thinking things like 'What should I say when it's my turn?' or they are focusing on their own ideas, or on their own opinion. Large parts of their attention are with themselves, not with the person whose turn it is.



When you give your complete attention to the person who is speaking, the conversation changes. Suddenly, input begins to build on what the others have said. New ideas pop up. You use your mind to think about *the other person* and what they have *just said*. When your thoughts go AWOL, you can go back in your mind to what you have just heard and silently repeat it to yourself, letting it sink in. You can also think about what you appreciate about them. The main thing is that *your attention is with them*, because when it is, *their thinking improves*.



But doesn't it depend on what they are saying?

Well, no. Not really.

If you are focused on seeing the flaws, then you will see the flaws.

If you are focused on seeing what is of value, then you will notice things that you would miss if you are focused on seeing the flaws. It's important to see the flaws too, but not to the exclusion of noticing the valuable – things like information and insights which you and others can develop further. We will get back to that in the chapter on Win-Win.

Your turn

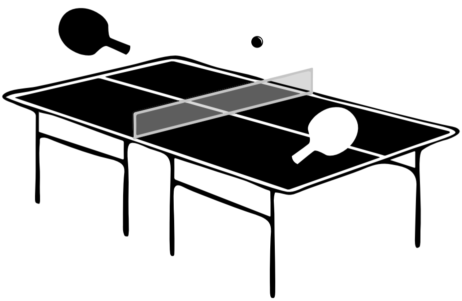
When it's your turn, it's *your* turn. You can settle in, knowing that no one will interrupt you, and that everyone genuinely wants to hear what you think – that they are not just nodding politely while they are busy planning what they are going to say. You can sit quietly for a while and let previous suggestions sink in; consider what is good about them, and how you can build on them. Then you can come up with something new – or be certain that you still think the way you did before, but based on far better information.

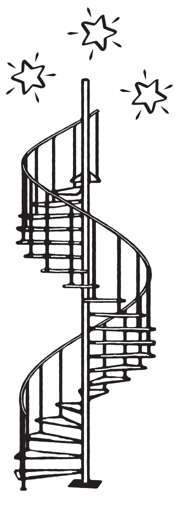
Time limit?

There are likely to be times when you want to let everyone think to the end of their ideas. The question may be important, or you may have plenty of time.

Sometimes it's better to say up front that everyone will get, say, two minutes. If you have someone in the group who tends to take up a lot of the air space, it's often wise to set a time limit. When their time is up, thinkers are welcome to finish their sentence.

If there is time after the first Round, you can continue round for as long as there are new thoughts and ideas. When someone has nothing more to say, they can pass.





How do you interact with each other, at home and at work? Is it like table tennis, back and forth, back and forth? Or is it rather like ascending a spiral staircase together, where each step leads to the next one – upwards, towards the stars – or at least to something that none of you had thought of before?

Hybrid and virtual

If we hadn't already invented Rounds, we would need to do so now, when hybrid and virtual meetings have become the new normal. Without the clear structure of Rounds, you end up, especially in hybrid meetings, with a 'we' (in the room) and a 'them' (on screen). This can make people feel excluded and undermine the quality of thinking.

In order for everyone to meet on equal terms, each person needs a screen of their own, ideally including those who meet physically. It's also important to ask everyone to put their phone away, and to close down emails and other computer programmes which can steal attention from the meeting.

It's generally a good idea to prepare a 'seating plan' and send it out together with the agenda: a picture of how everyone will be 'sitting' in relation to each other, preferably with a photo and, if needed, the name of each person, and preferably with an inviting background image for the whole group. Even if the 'seating plan' has been sent out in advance, it's usually easiest in practice for the person leading the meeting to keep track of, and say, whose turn it will be next until everyone is clear on where they are in the Round.

Groups where some members rarely or never meet physically can supplement group meetings with meetings in pairs to strengthen relationships. A good way to do that, is to ensure that everyone gets together from time to time in Thinking Pairs (see chapter 'Give someone time to think').

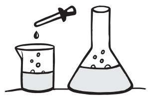
Watch out!

If someone interrupts, it's important to address it in a way that *doesn't offend the interrupter*. Sometimes it's best to let it pass, and give a general reminder before the next Round. Sometimes it's best to talk to the interrupter during a break, especially if the interrupter is a repeat offender.

Sometimes I say, as we are setting out, that someone usually forgets, and that's great, because we learn best from our mistakes, so then we applaud. Some groups love that.

The context determines what is likely to work best.

EXPERIMENT



Decide on the question on which you want everyone's best thinking. Without a clear question directed towards the desired outcome, you are likely to get a lot of unfocused talk.

- If appropriate, mention that it's important to regard everyone as equal thinkers, even if there are differences in age, role or status.
- Ask participants:
  - to give their full attention to the person who is thinking (see above: a Round is *not* the same as 'letting everyone have a say'.)
  - to promise not to interrupt
  - not to think about 'What am I going to say when it is my turn?' because they will figure that out when their turn comes

    - to pass the turn on to the next person by saying: 'What do you think?' Or 'I'm done'.
- ➢ Also mention that:
    - it's fine to sit quietly for a while and let the others' suggestions sink in before saying anything
    - it's fine to pass, and get your turn again at the end of the Round. You can then decide whether you want to say anything or not.
- ➢ Consider setting a time limit of one, two or three minutes per person. If you decide on a time limit, ask participants to set their phones to flight mode and clock their own time. If someone in the group has a tendency to be long-winded, a time limit can be invaluable.
- ➢ Decide whether to go clockwise or counter-clockwise. When you are all in the same room, you can go clockwise in one Round, and counter-clockwise in the next. In virtual or hybrid meetings, it's best to stick to one direction, to avoid confusion.
- ➢ Ask who wants to start. In families, you can choose to let the turns go more informally, as long as everyone gets their turn. In other contexts, it's generally preferable to decide in advance to do a Round, in turn.

Did everyone choose to use their time? How did the Round affect the mood of the group? How was the result influenced by the fact that everyone had a chance to contribute and be heard? Did you manage to tap into the group's collective intelligence?

Trust and engagement

'By using Rounds, managers can suddenly get a lot more from their teams,' says Gunnar Wallin, civil engineer, leadership consultant and psychosynthesis therapist. 'Trust increases, making team members really want to go somewhere. Managers who feel that everything depends on them wake up to the fact that "my team has as much drive as I do, if I take the time to really listen to them".'

Rubbish bin

Opening up

Thinking improves when we start a meeting or a conversation with our successes, with what is going well, or what gives us joy. The mood lightens, and a window of opportunity swings open, letting in fresh oxygen and a breath of new possibilities.

From despondence to hope

The atmosphere in the room was bleak. Business was appalling, stress was killing them, the group from the healthcare company all seemed to feel: 'we're doing our best, but the outlook is gloomy and hopeless', 'no one cares about us', 'there's no point' – as depressing as the grey smudge of a November morning with snow-slush in your shoes.

To start the conference off, I gave them a question and asked for their thinking in a Round.

What makes you smile today?

'The sun. The weather really is lovely,' said Alfred.

'Seeing all of you here, my brilliant, kind workmates,' said Helena, looking round and smiling. The others smiled back and the mood eased a little.

‘That my mother is taking care of my boys and that they’re having such a good time,’ said Emanuel. ‘When I left home, they’d draped a blanket over the kitchen chairs and were having breakfast in the “tent”.’

‘Being here. To be pampered and served delicious food,’ said Beatrice, who lived alone with her elderly and disabled mother.

‘When my little girls came in and hugged me this morning,’ said Agnes happily and everyone started thinking of children’s hugs. A feeling of warmth spread through the room.

‘That we got engaged this weekend,’ said Dan, the corners of his mouth hitting his hairline.

‘You what?’ exclaimed the whole room. ‘Congratulations! Wow!’ Suddenly, the room seemed brighter.

Clearly, that Round had improved matters, but it hadn’t quite got them to where they needed to be, so I asked them a second question.

In the last six months, what are your successes?

‘We landed that big contract,’ said Emanuel, pretending to wipe perspiration from his forehead. ‘Ironman was a piece of pretzel by comparison.’

Everyone laughed.

‘Somehow, we managed the autumn budget cuts. I didn’t think we would,’ said Beatrice.

‘Our staff are loyal, even after all we ask of them,’ said caring Helena.

‘We managed to deal with the media crisis. We would have been in the soup if we hadn’t,’ said Alfred.

A shiver ran through the room.

‘We got in on budget,’ said Dan.

‘We collaborated when things were in the pits in the autumn. Everyone did their best and we all worked like crazy,’ said Agnes. She straightened her back, and so did the others. Pride was beginning to shine in their eyes.

November had left the room, replaced by a dewy June summer morning, with sun from a clear, blue sky and cowslips in the grass. Suddenly they radiated ‘Wow, we’ve been amazing, just imagine what we’ve done.’ ‘If we’ve managed all that, then we can probably take on just about anything!’ ‘We really are quite something.’

Refuelled with energy, the group got working on the next set of challenges.

Light in the dark

Charles, divisional director at South Africa’s largest brewery, was opening the executive team meeting. Month after month, the results had been well below target and management had long since stopped sending champagne. The divisional director gazed around the room, looking each person in the eyes.

He reminded them that they would start by answering a question in turn and listening respectfully to one another. Then he asked:

‘Given our abysmal results over the past six months, what are one or two things that give you hope for the future?’

One by one they responded, and a pale streak of hope for the future beamed through the room, a feeling that perhaps, after all, it might possible to turn the trend. With that feeling in their bodies they took on the items of the day.

'We don't have time'

At work, people tend to believe that they don't have time to look at what is working well. Even if they don't say it out loud, the tacit message can be strong: 'What do you think this is, kindergarten?' as if it were childish to look at the positives.

While skipping the positive opening Round may seem like a simple way to save time (or to avoid wasting time), it means missing out on an excellent chance to refuel energy and engagement – and to access the best, most creative thinking about the items ahead.

Incidentally, it also means failing to see reality as it is, because reality includes what works. Workplaces have a tendency to take exclusive notice of new challenges, passing up the chance to celebrate what has been achieved, and the abilities and capabilities that enabled success.

It doesn't have to take long. A group of 34 people was asked: 'What question are you thinking about at the moment' and given the instruction: 'I don't want to know the background, I don't want to know what you think about the question, I just want to hear the question itself'. Three and a half minutes later, everyone in the room had spoken.

Why does it matter?

'Until people have spoken, they have not arrived.' So says Christopher Spence, experienced CEO of non-profit organisations. A positive opening Round is a way to get everyone engaged from the word go.

Thinking appreciative thoughts also stabilises heart rhythm and makes more blood flow to the brain, enabling thinking.

Furthermore, our mind, just like our muscles, is shaped by what we use it for. The circuits we use a lot grow faster and work better, while the pathways we don't use degenerate and slow down. When we think of problems all day long, we get used to seeing problems, whereas if we start to pay attention to what works, what we are happy about or grateful for, we fill up on energy, are happier, think better and open up to new ideas and solutions. These days, whenever something bad happens, I almost always find some silver lining to the cloud. It's not a conscious effort – it just happens. While I cannot be sure that it's on account of spending a lot of time in a Thinking Environment, it's certainly the most likely explanation that I can think of.

One question is usually enough

Usually, one positive opening Round is enough. There is value in everyone starting their response by saying their own name: it's one more confirmation that they are there.

If possible, choose a question that's related to the main thrust of the gathering. If the group is running a project and is about to take the next step, a good question might be: 'What is one success (last week/month/…).' A family sitting down to dinner can simply ask: 'What's been fun today?' and make sure everybody gets their uninterrupted chance to think about their day and be heard.

A parent meeting in a sports association started with the question: 'What's one thing that makes you happy that your child is doing sports?'

A board meeting opened with 'What's one thing we've accomplished in the past year?'

A sports team started their session with: 'What's one thing you appreciate about the team?'

Two colleagues started their meeting with: 'What's going well in your life at present?'

A Thinking Environment course day kicked off with: 1. Tell us about you and 2. If you had a super power, what would you like it to be? We all became so interested in the super powers that we almost forgot to introduce ourselves, but it didn't matter, because the super powers we wanted were a sufficient introduction.

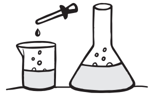
A list of sample opening Round questions can be found at the end of this chapter.

Watch out!

In an organisation with a strong focus on efficiency, a manager introduced positive Rounds. Reluctantly, team members followed instructions, but they started referring to him as 'Oprah'. After a while, he had had enough of their attitude and stopped the Rounds.

That's when they asked him to start doing them again. They missed them.

EXPERIMENT

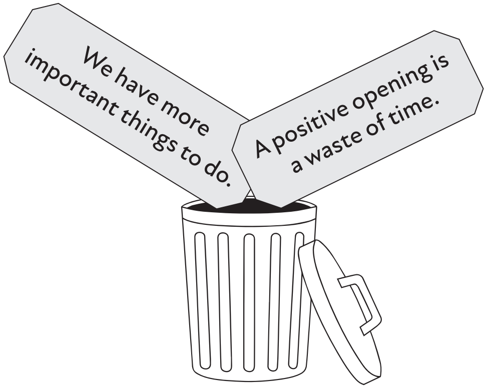


- Start off with a positive question. Suggest that everyone says their name and then responds to the question for the Round, e.g. 'Alfred. What makes me smile today is ...'
- Explain that you don't have to think about what you are going to say when it is your turn, because you will figure that out when it is your turn.
- If you have limited time, stress that it is important to be succinct in order for everyone to get the chance to speak. You can set a limit of max x seconds or max one minute, or ask for a very short sentence.
- If you have plenty of time, you do not need to focus on just 'one thing' but can ask the question more broadly, for example: 'What do you appreciate about this group?'
- Enjoy taking in what each person says. Shared joy is a double joy.

How does this affect the mood in the room? How does it affect the gathering?

When everyone knows how it works, you may want to ask the group who would like to propose the question for the opening Round.

Rubbish bin



Positive questions for opening Rounds

Below are some sample questions for opening Rounds. The possibilities are more or less endless. The context determines what question to go with. In the best of all worlds, you will craft a question that's connected to the purpose of the meeting. As long as it feels appropriate, setting people laughing is a real bonus.

Some of the questions below say 'one thing'. The purpose is to make the Round relatively quick. If you have plenty of time, you can omit it.

- ☆ What makes you smile today? (Or: What is making you smile these days?)
- ☆ What do you appreciate about … (the team/association/colleagues/company/group/…)?
- ☆ What is a recent success (this week/month/year/since our last meeting …)?

- ☆ What are one or two things that give you hope for the future?
- ☆ What are you proud of?
- ☆ Who is someone who has inspired you?
- ☆ What question are you thinking about?
- ☆ What is your favourite dessert?
- ☆ What is a difficult situation that you have coped well with, and what quality in you enabled you to do so?
- ☆ What is something you are grateful for?
- ☆ What is a compliment you have received that you have never forgotten?
- ☆ Where do you love to be?
- ☆ What have you learned recently?
- ☆ What is a new insight you have gained lately?
- ☆ What is one thing that is going well in your life right now?
- ☆ What are you looking forward to?
- ☆ What inspires you at the moment?
- ☆ What surprise has made you happy?
- ☆ When is a moment when you were really happy?
- ☆ What quality are you happy that you have?
- ☆ What do you like best about your job?
- ☆ What are your dreams?
- ☆ What can we be proud of, as a group?
- ☆ What is one thing we have succeeded in doing?
- ☆ What would you like to do if you had more time?
- ☆ What are you wondering about?
- ☆ What is going well?
- ☆ What is an experience of nature that you treasure?
- ☆ What is one thing that makes you happy that this is where you work?

Finish on a high

Ending on a positive note gives us energy and enables us to think more clearly and more creatively. That energy and a positive expectation for more great thinking can come along with us to our next meeting.

'Not another project!'

'We'll be starting a new project,' said the new CEO.

Teresa rolled her eyes and exchanged a wordless look with Daniel. Projects were nothing new to them. They would start with a bang, the Big Boss thought they would solve everything, then they would ebb out, and middle managers were left stuck in the mud with a bunch of sour employees.

'I've found us a great consultant.'

This time, he heard a sigh. He wasn't sure where it came from, but he could guess what they were thinking.

'All our people will work in groups for a half day,' he continued, 'and talk about problems, opportunities, and their ideas to improve things.'

Blank faces. Icy silence.

The danger signals were flashing an unmistakable and vivid red. 'Now what am I going to do?' thought the CEO. Then realisation struck. 'I've been just like them,' he thought, 'when one of my old bosses presented a new project and I thought: 'Not another useless consultant, not another useless project, doesn't he trust me, when are we ever going get our work done?'

'I know you're not longing for another project and another consultant,' he said. 'I get it. But could we still just consider what might be positive about it? Could everyone just say *one* thing that might be valuable about the project? Who would like to start, and we'll do a Round.'

Still this crushing silence, while the CEO's mandate lay in the balance. Someone breathed in.

'I can start,' said Teresa, glancing at the CEO. I'll help you out this once, said the look, but don't you dare try it again. 'Staff might be more engaged.'

'We can find out how many people experience problems with the same things,' continued Daniel, 'for example if problems in one location are just problems in that location, or if we have the same problem across the country.'

The Round continued.

'We may get ideas which improve customer satisfaction.'

'We may improve efficiency.'

'Staff feel they matter.'

'We'll get more of a common direction, so that it feels more like one company.'

The CEO felt his shoulders relaxing. The temperature in the room had gone from Siberian tundra to three snowdrops and a crocus.

'Thank you,' he said. 'Let's conclude by saying a quality we appreciate in the person to our left. Something we really mean.'

Daniel smiled and looked at Teresa.

'You're a thoroughly decent person,' he said.

'Thanks,' said Teresa.

The Round continued, from one to the other.

'I love your commitment.'

'You care about everyone.'

'You're full of good ideas.'

'You never give up.'

'You're practical, you find solutions.'

With a feeling on the right side of acceptance, the group concluded the meeting.

Don't let the sun go down on your anger

'Do not let the sun go down on your anger' is biblical for working things out before you go to bed. Even if we can't agree about whatever the fight was about, it's often possible to restore harmony to the relationship.

'My husband died a couple of years ago,' said Charlotte, 'and now I live on my own with my teenage daughter. Not surprisingly, things sometimes get quite stormy, but we've promised each other that we won't go to bed when we're cross with each other. It's even more important now that Sten isn't with us any more, because all we have is each other and that makes it so important that we take care of one another. Before we go to bed, we make a point of saying that we love each other and what we like about each other. It helps us sleep better.'

Important and valuable

Anna Pihl, who has been a Weight Watchers Coach for more than 20 years, relates how her encounter with the Thinking Environment has affected the meetings she holds with the people she coaches.

Nowadays, at the end of every meeting she asks participants to talk to each other for a minute about what has been important and valuable to them. 'What are you taking away from this time?'

'It has the most incredible effect. Many people are so unused to getting even 30 seconds to reflect. And I really see, as though cogwheels were churning away inside their heads, how things start moving in people's minds and it releases such energy – and so they leave with a thought and a desire for change. It has always been important to me to think about how people should feel when they get up to leave. What are they taking away with them, that will give them the strength to carry on with their lives?

'The words "important and valuable" really impact people,' she continues. 'You don't hear those words very often. "Is she asking me what's been valuable?" I can tell from their eyes and body language that they are thinking differently. "Valuable, what does that mean?" And because of that, I think they also feel important and valuable. The fact that someone wants to know what *I* think is important and valuable gives *me* value.'

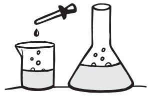
We remember what it was like at the end

In his best-selling book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Nobel Laureate in Economics Daniel Kahneman writes that carefully controlled scientific studies show that we remember two things: *what was the best/worst* and *what was it like at the end?*

If you have been discussing difficult issues or dealing with disagreement, it's particularly important to end on a positive note. The main issues may have left a lingering feeling of heaviness, but after a Round on what has been valuable and what we appreciate in each other, the heaviness tends to ease off, giving way to lightness and awareness of value.

Instead of leaving the meeting with a heavy head and heart, you feel at ease, lift your gaze, feel joy and commitment to the group, work or relationship. It becomes easier to think clearly and more constructively and the positive feeling may well come along with you to the next meeting, resulting in a positive feedback loop, spiralling upwards.

EXPERIMENT 1 – MEETINGS



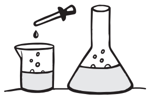
End a meeting by doing a Round on the questions:

- *'What is one thing you take away from this time?'* (or *'What has been valuable about this meeting?'*) and
- *'What is one quality you appreciate in the person on your left [or right]?'*

If you are very short of time, ask for just one word.

When you have ended in this way, what does it feel like after the meeting? How do you feel before the next meeting?

EXPERIMENT 2 – AT HOME



End the day by saying something positive to family members. If you have had a rough day, it is more important than ever. Even if you were furious earlier in the day, what is a quality in them that you appreciate?

How do you feel after telling them?

Watch out!

At work, the classic objection is: 'We don't have time, we have more important things to do.'

With the right instructions, it doesn't take long and experience shows that it's well worth the time.

Many groups try it for a while, but stop after a few times and say that they don't have time. The trick is to continue until it has grown into a new habit.

People who exercise every now and then may need to give themselves a proper talking-to in order to get up and go, while someone who exercises regularly longs to get moving. Just as with New Year's resolutions, the challenge is to hang on in there long enough for it to become a habit, so that you miss it if it isn't there.

Rubbish bin

Ask a young person what they think

When young people are given the chance to think, they grow, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of adults. Relationships improve too.

Some years ago, I heard something that shook me. At 20, Elin Axelsson was mature, highly capable, and the chair of a not inconsiderable sports club.

‘In all my years at school,’ said Elin, ‘no one has ever asked me what I think. I have been taught to debate to defend a position – whether I agree with it or not – but no one has ever asked me what I think.’

The next day I told Mikaela Hansson what Elin had said. Mikaela was 21, and a much-appreciated sports coach who managed to make even the boring parts of training fun.

‘That doesn’t surprise me,’ said Mikaela. ‘No one’s asked me either.’

Another young lady paid her parents a fine compliment. ‘It’s never seriously occurred to me that people might not be interested in what I think,’ she said.

So you might want to ask a young person what they think and listen to the answer as if their life depended on it. It may.

Troublemakers transformed

The headmaster was at his wits' end. He had ordered the five boys to come to his office, he had told them off in no uncertain terms, and he made them stand to attention outside his door for an hour. Every time they had wreaked havoc at school, he had tried a different approach. By now, he had tried everything he could think of, and nothing had helped. They kept creating disturbances, breaking things, climbing the walls, disrupting the order in class, and misbehaving during breaks.

Although the school is the best in the area, it's in a difficult neighbourhood, surrounded by criminal gangs and afflicted by poverty. Through Partnership for Possibility, which gives school leaders in South Africa a contact person outside the school, the headmaster had an idea for a different approach.

The next time the boys 'created', he said he wanted to talk to them one by one. The boys were terrified. What on earth was the headmaster going to say?

He moved the chairs in his office closer together, and asked the boys, one at a time, to come in and sit down. Then he sat down near them and asked:

'What's going on? Tell me, so I can understand.'

And he listened. And so, he began to grasp how life was treating these children and it broke his heart.

'Mom has left us, we're alone. Dad's always at work and I have to take care of my little brother.'

‘There isn’t enough food, we’re hungry.’

And he realised that the boys were simply doing what they could to survive. They were acting out in a desperate bid for attention.

The headmaster couldn’t change the fact that their mother wasn’t there for them. Feeling that there wasn’t much that he could do, he simply listened and said:

‘It’s hard, I understand that, come and talk to me more often, come and tell me when something’s up.’

The class calmed down. The boys stopped causing trouble and started to get interested in their schoolwork. Suddenly, they even did well at school.

A second chance

It’s more than forty years ago, but I still remember exactly where we sat, in the corner of the bar of King’s College, Cambridge. I was in my second year and hadn’t done a stroke of work all term. The longer this went on, the more ashamed I felt, and the more difficult it was to get started. Stephen Hugh-Jones, Director of Studies of the subject I was doing, came and sat down next to me.

‘How’s it going, Monica?’ he asked.

Then he didn’t say much, while I cried and told him that I wasn’t really interested in the subject he loved.

‘What do you want to read instead?’ he wondered, listening again.

I ended up changing subject and the rest is history, but it has stayed with me. He could just as easily have told me to come to his office and told me that I had to pull my socks up or I would be expelled. I might have dragged on for another year. Instead, I was given a second chance. Without it, my life would have been completely different. Two questions and some truly excellent listening. Thank you.

The professor and the high school graduate – help that makes a difference

The professor of quantum chemistry at one of Sweden's most respected universities was telling us about an organisational problem. In the room were a skilled HR specialist, an experienced 63-year-old consultant, an enterprising project manager in her mid-fifties, the manager of one of Sweden's most successful recycling facilities, a youth leader, and a 29-year-old cheerleading coach. The professor asked his question and we did a Round. When the round was over, I distinctly heard the professor muttering to himself: 'The best help comes from the most unexpected places.'

Sarah, 29, is not a professor. She has not even been to university. But her contribution was the one that really helped. When you read the caption above, who did you think helped whom?

Cleverer than you?

'Do you think I'm cleverer than you are?'

'Do you think I'm better at thinking than you are?'

This is how Diana Sendlak Brundin begins her first lecture on leadership at Halmstad University. Safe in the crowd, over 100 students from all over the world answer: 'Yes!'

‘I don’t think so,’ says Diana. ‘I may know this subject better, but I’m not better at thinking.’

When we think together, says Diana, the thinking is so much better. She invites the students to create an environment for thinking and provides them with some ways of being with each other that create good conditions for thinking: *Don’t interrupt. Everyone’s thoughts are equally important. Listen actively to each person, and think positively about them.* With that as their basis, they create groups of four and think about the question:

‘What can we do, in this room, to create a Thinking Environment?’

‘The lecture is a total of two hours. Thanks to that start, which takes less than ten minutes, the students get so much more value from the two hours,’ says Diana.

During the lecture, which is about what is *not* on the slides, Diana gives the students a few 15-20-minute tasks to do in groups, addressing three or four questions such as *How might this be of value to you? In what kinds of situations might this be useful?*

‘There’s no point in my rehashing what’s in the hand-out,’ says Diana. ‘They can read.’

The students love Diana’s lectures. Not surprisingly, they also learn a lot.

Finishing your thought

Karolina Palmberg is like a big, warm and joyful embrace. She works with children and young people with mental ill-health and through her, they get the chance to take responsibility for their condition by thinking for themselves. She wanted to check if she practices what she preaches, so she asked her children:

'At our house, are you able to finish your thought?'

'This house,' responded the eleven-year-old with authority, 'is one of the few places in the world where you can finish your thought, and talk without being interrupted.'

Fascinated, Karolina asked: 'Is there anywhere else?'

'Yes, when you're with grandpa, because he doesn't hear very well.'

'That was very interesting, Miss'

Elin Ljung, the teacher you met in the chapter on appreciation, has experimented by giving the seven-year-olds in her class time to think about questions such as *What's a good friend like? My favourite animal? When I grow up, I'm going to…?* The children were given one minute each per question 'and that's a long time for a seven-year-old,' says Elin.

Since numbers were uneven, one group numbered three, so when the children had had one minute each, the pairs were asked to talk about what it was like to talk to each other like that.

'The classroom went so quiet,' says Elin, 'and it stayed quiet when they talked about what it was like to talk like that too.'

Afterwards, one of the seven-year-olds said:

'That was very interesting, Miss.'

Elin is intent on listening well to the children, to show them what good listening means, and it's not always easy, she says. Listening was one item in performance appraisals and the class has kept talking about how important it is to let others speak without interruption, and to be able to finish one's thinking.

'It's been really helpful, particularly in group work,' says Elin.

I am interested in who you are

'It's an exceptional gift to give your child,' says Gunnar Wallin, father of three, 'to show that *I am really interested in you*. To give your full attention every now and then and not to weigh the child down with parental guidance, or telling them what to do, but just to be interested in what they're thinking, and when they finish to ask 'What more do you think?' I'm sure the relationship between parent and teenager will be so much better if I genuinely listen, and put parenting aside when we have this kind of conversation.

'And it's not just teenage children. My son is nine. He has so many thoughts he wants to share. We used to read a book at bedtime, but now he often says: "Dad, let's just lie here and talk instead." He has his own story. A child feels so strongly the value of expressing things, so I hope to keep this going with him when he's in his teens, to go for a drive, or walk in the woods, and just listen to each other.'

A place to sort through one's thoughts

Max was furious. His mother had forced him to help his little sister, even though he didn't want to and she didn't want his help, and when it didn't work out, his mother had been furious with *him* and had taken his sister's side. It was just *so unfair*!

At this point, his mother suggested that they sit down together, and he would say everything he was thinking and feeling, and she wouldn't interrupt, or say anything, or tell him off: she would simply listen. To begin with, he was just angry, but because his mother really listened, he was able to say everything he was thinking and feeling, and so he calmed down – and his mother could begin to see his side of things. It worked so well that they have done it again and again. It has also made his mother realise what a lovely person her son is.

'He's wise, because sometimes he can say things like he hates this person and then after a while he says: "No, Mum, I don't think I really hate him, I hate why he's doing this." He gets to think things over, and so he gets a better understanding of why things are the way they are, so it's helped him, and it's helped us, and the counsellor says it's helped him at school, where he's been bullied,' says his mother.

'He isn't as anxious any more, he doesn't have the anxiety attacks he had in the fall, he doesn't get as upset, he doesn't get as sad. It's really helped us to cope with the day-to-day,' she continues.

His mother's listening gives him a place where he can sort through his thoughts.

Life Choices is an organisation in South Africa that helps young people reach their potential. Thinking Pairs (see page 37) is part of its programs for families, and both children and parents say they cannot remember being so listened to, and that it's amazing that something so simple can be so powerful.

Equality and information

Children and young people love my brother-in-law Bo Lindström, perhaps because he treats them with such profound respect and interest. He says that young people think well, provided they have the relevant information. When you want to give a young person the opportunity to think and contribute on important issues, make sure they have sufficient and accurate information, and that they feel that you really want to hear what they think. That goes for us all.

A more easeful morning

Have you ever spent the morning fuming, stressed-out, and furiously trying to wrestle warm winter clothes on to an unwilling and surprisingly strong child, screaming at the top of its lungs?

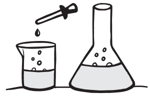
Lena Alfredius, for many years the director of a Montessori preschool, taught me a different way. Before the eruption of World War III in the entrance hall, ask the child:

'Would you go outside and check whether we need our warm clothes today?'

The child may think the weather is just as sunny and warm as it was yesterday, whereas you have checked the thermometer and know that it's below freezing today.

Information can do wonders.

EXPERIMENT



- ➢ Choose a question on which you would like children's or young people's thinking. Or just start listening.
- ➢ If necessary, make sure they have adequate, accurate information. Often, they have all the information they need. They know and understand far more than many adults think.
- ➢ Listen with interest. Don't interrupt.
- ➢ At the end, see what happens if you tell them a quality you appreciate in them. (More on appreciation in the chapter 'Appreciate Someone'.)

How did they respond to being asked? What did they look like while you listened? How did their thinking develop? How did it affect your relationship?

Watch out!

It's usually is best to be silent, to simply listen and not to interrupt, but saying nothing isn't an end in itself. Stay tuned for any signals that the child or young person needs something from you – a confirmation of some kind, or a question.

Rubbish bin

Ask yourself: 'What am I feeling?'

Thoughts and feelings are intimately intertwined. When we are clear about what we feel, we think more clearly.

Clarity

Amanda froze and her mind went blank. White-faced, she stared at Thomas, who had just presented her idea as if it were his.

'Excuse me,' she said, getting up.

Five seconds later, she had locked herself in the loo and her tears were hosing it down.

Soon, she calmed down, blew her nose, and started thinking. Why was she so upset?

'Because it just happened again,' she thought. 'He's filched my idea *again* and makes it sound like it's his. That's why I'm so sad.'

'No,' her thoughts continued, 'I'm not sad, I'm furious. How *could* he? Do the others believe him?'

Quick look in the mirror, removing all traces of the recent outburst, back to the conference room, calm, cool, and collected, because she knew that she was angry and she knew why. Suddenly, her brain was working again.

She was tempted to slay Thomas with a comment, but Amanda resisted the urge and asked to talk to him after the meeting.

Expose a troll to sunlight, and it will burst

For an hour and a half, William had talked about how he was bullied as a child. How the others had called him fat, ugly, dick-head, stupid, fatso, nasty, nerd, idiot… How he was excluded from the other children's play. How he had cried and cried, and the shame that he had felt: shame that he was somebody that people could say such things about, shame that there was something wrong with him. His fear of what would happen at school. How he never told anyone, because he didn't want his parents to be burdened with the awareness that there was something wrong with him.

He had played computer games, because that was a place where he was safe, where he could relax, shut out all the nasty voices, and be the person he wanted to be. It had been a refuge and a relief, but in the end, it had become an addiction he couldn't break, and shame had returned, adding depression over how he was wasting his life. He couldn't think properly, and had even considered suicide. Eventually, he had handed in his computer to try to return to life.

'I'm 25, and this is the first time I've ever talked about what it felt like. I've talked about what happened before, but never about how I felt.'

He straightened his back and looked me straight in the eyes.

'God, what a relief to put it into words,' he said. 'Thanks. I'll stop there.'

A few months later he told me again how important it had been for him to go through the whole story of his life, and to talk about both what he thought and what he felt.

'Suddenly I realised how I felt about it. And because I went through the feeling, I was able to start working on my thinking and what it had all really been like for me. When the emotions get in the way, you can't think, but when you put a name to the emotions, they fly away with tremendous force, and that frees up your mind.

'I always used to talk about it without identifying the feeling, and then the words have a different meaning, and so in a sense what you're saying isn't true. Because I could accept the feeling and forgive what I'd done, I was able to move on.'

Soon afterwards, William started studying, because he wanted to get a job so he could stand on his own two feet. His brain, which had been muddled by years of computer games, is now back to normal. He's got his high-school leaving diploma, found himself a steady job, left home, and is living happily with his girlfriend.

Let it out and let it go

Feelings are intertwined with thoughts, so when we don't know what we're feeling, our thinking goes mushy. As soon as we become aware of what we feel, it gets easier to deal with both our feelings and our thinking.

At work, we usually pretend to be exclusively rational, as though the professional way to be was to have no feelings. The only thing is – it doesn't work.

We cannot leave a part of ourselves in a little box by the entrance, and pick it up at the end of the day. Doing so might be tidy and desirable, but that's not how we're built: our emotions accompany us wherever we go. When we pretend that we don't have them, as many people do at work, they muddle our thinking and our decisions.

Many years ago, Nancy Kline noticed that when someone expresses what they feel, the feeling passes, often quickly, and the person thinks more clearly afterwards. The listener has an important task: to stay present. As listeners, we don't need to give comfort, nor (emphatically) do we need to make a joke, as if feelings were embarrassing. We need simply to be there, at ease, giving our attention.

The listener may feel uncomfortable and want to do something to stop the expression of emotions, or to comfort or to help, but this is generally unnecessary and may even be counterproductive. The person who is expressing their feelings is doing just fine.

'People think that if you express feelings, you're losing control, or whoever listens will lose control,' says Fiona Dawe, former CEO of YouthNet. 'People also feel that it's the *listener's* responsibility to prevent expressions of emotion, or to take care of the one who expresses them, even though clearly they have been absolutely fine taking care of themselves until now. We actually think with our feelings, not just with our rational, left brain, and if we pretend that the feelings aren't there, they hi-jack the situation.'

Modern research confirms Nancy Kline's observation. 'Trying not to feel something doesn't work,' writes David Rock in *Your Brain at Work*, which is based on modern neuroscience. 'Describe an emotion in just a word or two, and it helps reduce the emotion. Open up a dialogue about an emotion, though, and you tend to increase it.'

Angry or sad?

Our culture conditions us when it comes to what emotions we are allowed to express. Furthermore, emotions are often layered, one on top of the other, like a cake. From time to time, I have asked groups:

'Who in this group cries when in actual fact you're angry?'

A forest of women's hands shoots up.

'Who gets angry when in actual fact you're sad?'

Men's hands go up.

When we acknowledge one feeling, we can find another, nestled underneath.

EXPERIMENT 1

When you notice that you can't think clearly, ask yourself, 'What do I feel?' If possible, say the answer out loud.

Did that help clear up your thinking?

If it didn't, ask someone to listen while you verbalise what you are feeling.

If you are still unable to think clearly, try reading the next chapter, on assumptions.

If a whole group has reason to be angry, afraid or sad, everyone can think (in a Round) about: 'What do you think or feel about x?' Since the question is about both thoughts and feelings, it's not as challenging, nor as directive, as asking 'What do you feel about x?'

EXPERIMENT 2

Laughter relaxes the atmosphere.

If appropriate in the context, try to start meetings with a question or something else that brings laughter (see the chapter on positive opening rounds, 'Opening Up').

How does it affect the atmosphere in the room?

How does it affect the meeting?

Watch out!

Some emotions are easier to deal with than others, and there is a big difference between on the one hand naming an emotion, for example 'I'm angry' or 'I'm sad', and on the other hand expressing the feeling by crying or screaming.

In an open culture, both naming and expressing feelings will be welcomed. The culture determines what is acceptable and what is not. You may want to think and talk with others in the group about how you want feelings to be expressed.

Rubbish bin

Prison break from untrue assumptions

When we can't work something out, the block is often an untrue assumption: we are assuming something that isn't true, but we are living as if it were true. Entirely new possibilities open up when we recognise that the assumption is simply untrue – and replace it with a true and liberating assumption.

Near death experience – or not

It was party time at Beata's father's house in the Stockholm archipelago: singing, laughter, and booze galore. The men were getting increasingly drunk and ugly, the jokes increasingly coarse. Suddenly, one of them is seized by an impulse. He takes Beata, aged three, and tries to throw her in a boat, but he is so drunk that he doesn't even notice that he misses his target. With a huge splash, Beata falls in the sea. Her thick jumper and heavy boots weigh her down and she sinks like a stone to the bottom, but then starts to paddle to get back to the surface. Meanwhile, her older brother is screaming fit to burst eardrums.

How do you think this story ends?

How do you think Beata was affected by the incident? What conclusions did she draw? Did she grow afraid of men, because she assumed that men were unreliable? Was she ridden by anxiety, did she have nightmares, did she wet her bed because she assumed that the world was a dangerous place? As a teenager, was she afraid to go out at night? Did she become wary of water and refuse to go boating? Let's return to 1966 and find out.

Beata is splashing about in the sea, trying to get her head above water.

Her father comes running from the house, dives in, swims out and pulls out his little girl. Coughing, Beata stands on the pier, raises her arms skywards, and shouts with joy: 'Yes! I can swim!'

Based on our experiences, we draw conclusions. Nancy Kline points out that it's often not the events we have been involved in that shape our thinking, but the *assumptions* we have made based on the events. Beata, aged three, made a positive assumption, and now that she's an adult, she still has the same positive energy as the little girl with her hands stretched above her head in a gesture of victory. She sees herself as a person who can swim.

Other times, we draw conclusions that stop and limit us, and which may make us feel angry or sad, powerless or worthless. When that has happened, we often find that we are assuming something that is untrue, but that we live as if it were true. By the simple act of replacing the untrue and most limiting assumption with a true and liberating one, we can make our lives richer and more joyful. Elizabeth in the next story knows that to be true.

Full of love

At last, Elizabeth's breathing steadied. She had wiped her tears with the back of her hand, and blown her nose on a tissue.

When she started talking, her shoulders were tightly strung, as if the world might explode if she let go. She started out with great control, seemingly objective and dispassionate.

'My daughter is so angry. She thinks I interfere and that I don't respect her as a responsible adult. She knows I want the best for her, but that doesn't seem to make the slightest difference.

'A few days ago, I sent her some papers about an insurance policy – just some information about the terms. I've paid the insurance since she was a child, so of course I would send it to her, now that she's going to take over responsibility for paying the premium. She was livid, because she thinks that I don't think she's capable of running her life. She screamed over the phone, "I don't want to talk to you!" And she just hung up. And then she started texting. "You are interfering AGAIN". "It's less than a month since you interfered over my new job." "Do you think I am stupid?" "Would you just stop?" "You never do this to Sebastian."'

'I tried to call her,' continued Elizabeth, 'but she wouldn't pick up the phone. I suggested we meet and talk about it, but she didn't want to see me.'

'It really hurts.'

Tears welled up in her eyes.

'I don't want to hurt her. I don't think she treats anyone else like this. Sometimes things are quiet for a few weeks, and then something like this happens again. I feel like I'm treading on a minefield, I never know when she'll explode. It's awful. I don't want to be treated like this, but she's my daughter.'

Elizabeth fell silent.

She wiped her nose with the back of her hand and I handed her some tissues so that she could blow her nose. There is zero evidence that snot improves thinking.

'What am I assuming that makes me feel this way, that makes me so sad?' she said.

She was quiet for a few seconds.

'I'm assuming that it will always be like this,' she answered her own question.

'And do I think that's true?' she continued the conversation with herself, while I kept listening.

'No,' she said, 'it's not true.' (Silence). 'She'll come back.'

She was still. The tears had stopped flowing and her eyes were moving, so I could see that she was thinking. A few minutes later, she said a little hesitantly:

'It's not true. She's full of love and she'll come back.'

Silence.

She nodded a few times.

After a minute or so, she looked me straight in the eye and said confidently:

'She's full of love and she'll come back.'

Suddenly, her breathing eased, and I noticed that her shoulders had dropped.

Getting rid of an untrue, limiting assumption

Long before Elizabeth and I met that day, she has known that we assume things that affect us, things that may not be true, but that we live as if they were true. When you notice that you're stuck and cannot figure something out, it may well be that you're assuming something that is stopping you.

Often the mind finds its own way. The questions that the mind seems to ask itself, when it's able to, go something like this:

What do I want to achieve? (Elizabeth wanted to stop feeling the way she did.)

What am I assuming that stops me … (or 'makes me …').

Which assumption is most stopping me?

Do I think it's true? What are my reasons for thinking so?

If it isn't true, what do I think is true and liberating instead?

If I knew [what is true and liberating] how would I reach my goal?

The question 'If it's not true, what do I think is true and liberating instead?' is a place for creativity, a time to conceive a completely new perspective on whatever was holding you back. From there, you can generate a new take on life.

More about untrue assumptions, and how to replace them with true and liberating assumptions, can be found in Nancy Kline's books and in the Thinking Partnership Course.

Practicing what you preach

Not only do untrue assumptions limit us in our personal lives, they show up at work as well.

Philip, Mia, Daniel and Nina had come together to think about how to become a company that practices what it preaches. Things were moving very slowly, if at all. The longer the meeting went on, the more it felt as though they were trying to push through thick mud. Some ideas were put forward, but there was no real spark of engagement, and the ideas were just not taking off. As the facilitator, I finally asked:

‘What are you assuming that stops you from figuring out how to become a company that practices what you preach?’

The room went quiet. Breathing eased, attention sharpened, nothing moved except their eyes, so clearly, they were thinking.

‘I can start,’ Mia said. ‘I’m assuming that it doesn’t matter what I think, because nobody will care anyway.’

‘I’m assuming we can’t afford it,’ said Philip.

‘I’m assuming that we don’t have time,’ contributed Daniel. ‘That we have to spend all our time on stuff that’s profitable in the short term.’

‘I’m assuming that it just isn’t important enough,’ said Nina.

‘Which assumption is most stopping you?’ I asked.

They quickly concluded that what was most stopping them was that it didn’t matter what they arrived at, because no one cared anyway.

‘What could you assume instead, that would enable you to think about how you can become a company that practices what you preach?’

‘I think it’s been true that nobody cares, but I’m thinking of Martin,’ said Nina. ‘He’s not like the others in the management team. If we come up with good ideas, I think he’ll push for them, and I think he might succeed. So, I think we can simply assume that this time it might succeed.’

The others nodded their agreement, and I asked:

‘If you knew that this time it might succeed, how would you become a company that practices what you preach?’

And so, the floodgates opened.

‘We would discontinue individual bonuses, because they make us compete with each other.’

‘We would appreciate each other often.’

‘We would take time to think in pairs every week.’

‘We would celebrate successes.’

‘We would all meet once a month and reflect on what we’ve learned, so that we become a learning organisation.’

‘We would talk about what we’re proud of.’

A new assumption worth millions

The management team was working on a strategy to generate 100 million in profit in the neighbouring country in the following year. Thinking was so slow, that the facilitators finally asked: ‘What might you or the team be assuming that’s stopping you from developing a strategy to generate 100 million in profit in the neighbouring country next year?’

Each participant’s assumptions were written on a flipchart for all to see: ‘I’m assuming that we would have to acquire a company in that country’, ‘I’m assuming we don’t have sufficient infrastructure’, and so on until a participant said ‘I’m assuming that it’s impossible.’

The group was divided into pairs and groups of three to think about which assumption was most stopping them. They came to the conclusion that the assumption that it was impossible was the one most stopping them. The facilitators then asked if they thought it was true that it was impossible, and that was when the CEO gave the group a missing piece of information and the participants could see that it was not true that it was impossible.

‘So, if it’s not true that it’s impossible, how would you express what is true?’ asked the facilitators. The group responded: ‘That it’s possible.’

‘If you knew it’s possible to generate 100 million in profit in the neighbouring country next year, how would you do it?’ asked the facilitators.

Twenty minutes later, they had their strategy.

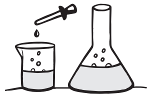
After eighteen months, the results were in: the strategy worked. So just to emphasise this point: once they had a true and liberating assumption and accurate information, it took them *twenty minutes* to develop a strategy worth millions. Without them, would they ever have got there at all?

When you sense that a group is stuck in thick mud, or that ideas are just not going anywhere, it’s likely to be a sign that limiting assumptions are at large and holding it back.

When Diana Sendlak Brundin works with teams, she teaches them how limiting assumptions work and the groups learn how to recognise and work through assumptions. ‘When the group gets stuck, the group members ask themselves: “What are we assuming now, that makes us think that way?” But not every team is ready for that. ‘Asking a question like that requires a level of safety in the group,’ says Diana. I agree.

In organisations, limiting assumptions are often about lack of time, staff or budget, or that we have to stick to current technology and working methods. If anyone can ask or guess which assumption is the most stopping, and ask a question that turns that assumption on its head – for example ‘If we knew that we could get more time, what would we do?’ – thinking can take off. For this to be taken seriously and to work, the suggestion must be credible to the participants.

EXPERIMENT



When you get stuck, or when you are sad, angry or frightened, ask:

- What am I assuming that stops me from (or 'that makes me...')
- What am I assuming that is most stopping me from (or 'that makes me ...')
- Do I think it's true? What are my reasons for thinking that it's true (or untrue)?
- What can I assume instead, which is true and liberating?
- If I knew [what is true and liberating] how would I [reach my goal]?

Watch out!

In the right circumstances, the questions about assumptions are worth their weight in gold. But they require trust, and they need to be welcome, otherwise they can – worst case – be experienced as an attack. That's why I recommend beginning by asking them of yourself, and not to try them out on others.

Levelling up – Reversing the assumption

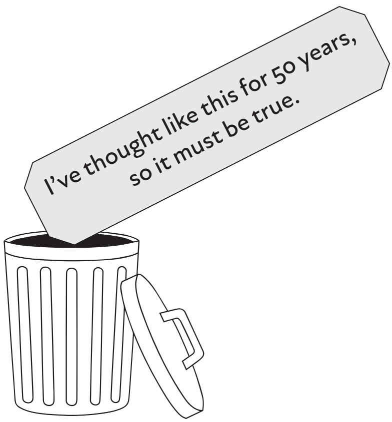
Somebody needed to get the CEO to agree to a proposal developed by the group.

'I'm happy to do it, but you'll have to tell me what to say because I've only got a peanut brain,' said David.

'David, if you knew that you have a brain the size of a planet, what would you say to the CEO?' facilitator Anne Hathaway dared to ask, because there was a lot of trust in the group.

David audibly exhaled, thought for a few seconds and said: 'Well if I knew *that*, then I would …' One idea after the other tumbled out and the others rushed to write them all down.

Rubbish bin



A place that welcomes you

Thinking improves when the place signals to people that they matter. To access the best thinking, create a welcoming physical environment.

Welcome? Home?

Amanda's parents are divorced, and her father has moved in with a new partner. Like many children of divorced parents, Amanda lives alternate weeks with her mother and father. At her mother's place, she has a room of her own, but not at her father's.

'You can use this room when you're here, but it's not your room. Got it?' said Amanda's father.

Welcome? Home?

'Don't think here!'

Many people have jobs that require them to think, but the workplace is an open-plan office. Some love it, others don't, but whether or not you like open-plan offices, they inevitably expose you to considerable risk of being interrupted. Open-plan offices are the physical expression of 'Don't think here'.

In his book *Your Brain at Work*, David Rock writes that a study, published in October 2005, found that employees spend an average of 11 minutes on a project before being distracted.

When I say that to working people these days, most people say: '11 minutes? That's a long time!'

Rock continues: 'After an interruption, it takes them 25 minutes to return to the original task, if they do at all. […] By the time you get back to where you were, your ability to stay focused goes down even further, as you have even less glucose available now. Change focus ten times an hour (one study showed people in offices did so as often as twenty times an hour) and your productive thinking time is only a fraction of what's possible. Less energy equals less capacity to understand, decide, recall, memorize […]. The result could be mistakes on important tasks. Or distractions can cause you to forget good ideas and lose valuable insights. […] Switching off all communication devices during any thinking work seems to be one of the best strategies for improving mental performance.'

These days, many offices have glass walls, which let in more light and make the premises airy and welcoming. The downside is that they increase the risk of being distracted by someone passing outside, and make it more difficult to settle into the ease and focus we need in order to think well.

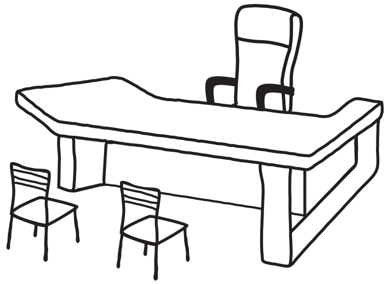
How might the physical environment be designed to enable staff members to take good decisions, in their day-to-day work and in meetings?

The deafening voice of furnishings

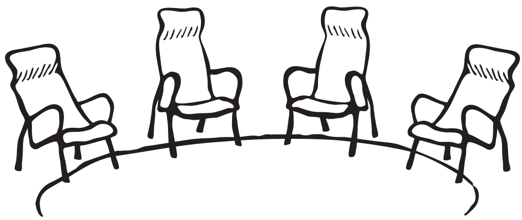
Many years ago, I did some work for Gunnar, who had recently been appointed CEO. Before he started, I interviewed his predecessor, Carl. Ensconced in an impressive and plush leather armchair, Carl greeted me from across a large desk. Across the desk were two small, slightly lower, bare, hard and upright chairs for visitors.

I sat down on a visitor's chair, my nose at desktop level – at least that's how it felt.

How well do people think here?

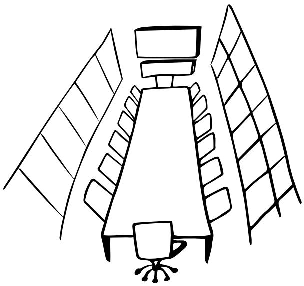


The next time I returned to the same room, the imposing desk and hard chairs for visitors had vanished, and I was welcomed by a large, round, bright red carpet with eight comfortable sheepskin-covered armchairs in a circle. Gunnar had taken charge.



‘This is a room for conversations,’ said Gunnar. ‘I want to hear what people think.’

The culture of a workplace is an active choice, and everyone who works there contributes to shaping it. How the workplace is designed is a physical expression of the desired culture.



Long, narrow boardroom tables give me the shivers. How can the person sitting at the bottom end feel like a fully accepted member of the team? King Arthur and the Knights of the Oblong Table? I don’t think so.

A round table helps us develop the best thinking together, examining issues from all different perspectives. In fact, do we even need a table?

How can the venue make people feel ‘You matter’?

There are many ways to arrange a place so that people feel they matter, and so that they can think well. Here are some examples. The possibilities are more or less endless.

- ☆ Gunnar created a room to think in, with comfortable seating and warm colours.

- ☆ A financial advisor devised a cosy living room section in his office, where he could talk to his clients about how they wanted to spend the years ahead. When it comes to financial planning, that question is key. Many couples haven't talked about what they want from the future, and it's far better to have such a pivotal conversation on a comfortable couch than across a big desk. Once they had had that fundamental conversation, they moved over to the desk, to discuss how to invest the money.

- ☆ When Christopher Spence was the head of London Lighthouse and chaired meetings with ministers and officials in the gloomy, bare and sometimes windowless rooms provided by the government, he always brought a bouquet of beautiful flowers and a vase, and made sure the flowers greeted the participants as they arrived. Christopher had also made sure that the London Lighthouse itself made people feel, from the moment they arrived, that they mattered profoundly.

- ☆ When I checked into my room before a conference, I found on the bedspread a handwritten card from the person chairing the conference, saying how happy she was that *I* was there. Did I feel welcome? Yes, thank you very much, the fact that she had cared so much about my being there made the trip to England worthwhile, conference or no conference.

- As one of the directors of Standard Bank in Johannesburg, Helena Dolny had a large office, while all other staff members sat in the open-plan office outside. Helena moved her desk to the open-plan area and turned her office into a meeting room for the group. Many managers have made similar adjustments, putting people and efficiency above their own status.

- If the meeting room has glass walls, curtains to temporarily cover the glass will make it cosier and less vulnerable to external interruption. In such a safe haven, it's easier to come up with new thinking, and to give free expression to thoughts and feelings.

- Find yourself a new location. Outdoors, fresh air and contact with nature can lead to more grounded conversations, whether you go for a walk or sit on the stump of a tree in the woods. My daughter and I have had many of our best conversations immersed in the relaxing warm pool of a spa. Many teenagers have great conversations with their parents when they are driving somewhere together. Just make sure the surroundings aren't too distracting: good attention is always crucial.

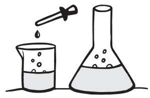
- Switching places with each other can give new dimensions to conversations in families and groups.

- Reducing the physical distance between people can make it easier to approach each other mentally. Do we need to have a table? If so, can the table be round, low and/or small?

- Even an attractively wrapped chocolate in each person's place can give the start of a meeting a different feel.

- With four candles and the beautifully handwritten text: 'I offer free listening. What is on your mind?', Vivianne Thomsson offered visitors at her local library a place to think during Advent.

EXPERIMENT



There isn't one, single, best-for-all-situations way to show that everyone is important, to generate the best thinking from everyone.

What might suit this group at this time? What might the participants appreciate, perhaps something a little bit out of the ordinary?

How did participants react? What impact do you think it had on the meeting?

Rubbish bin

No thinking without body

For as long as we live, the body is the designated work-place for the brain, and it sets the conditions for the brain's performance. To access our best thinking, we need to give our body the best conditions.

When you are stuck, get moving

Three variations on a mobile theme

1. Stefan Gustafsson jumped onto the jetty, hoisted the canoe onto his shoulder and ran for the boathouse, because he knew there was no time to be lost. Setting the canoe down on the porch, he ran into the boathouse to write down the ideas and solutions he had come up with while he had been out training. Quickly, he reached for the pad and pen he had left handy before the outing.

It had become his way of life: daytime office job, while training for canoe marathon championships. Three World Championship silver medals and trophies from numerous World Cup victories gleamed in the trophy cabinet at home, and, while out training, he had kept solving seemingly insoluble job problems. It was as though things got out of their stuck place – ideas and solutions just appeared when his body was working hard. But if he didn't dash in and note them down as soon as he got back, he would lose them, so he had learned the hard way to leave paper and pen available.

2. My friend Anders Fosselius was CEO of an advertising agency with declining revenues and limited understanding of the consequences of its illness. When stress threatened to kill him, he laced up his trainers and went for a run – and, alakazam, solutions often appeared of their own accord, without him thinking consciously about the problems.

3. For my own part, I detest running. But an outing in my rowing boat is pure enjoyment, with the sun glittering on the water and reflecting back on the rocks. And time and time again I have come up with new ideas while out rowing. I may not even have been thinking of problems when I get in the boat – an idea or a solution to something I have been thinking about just appears, out of the blue.

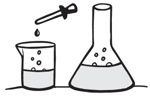
In his book *The Real Happy Pill*, psychiatrist Anders Hansen argues convincingly that all forms of exercise improve the functioning of the brain. The book is full of examples and references to serious research, but the executive summary couldn't be more straightforward: take a brisk walk or get moving in any other way. All exercise strengthens the brain, and provided you do not exhaust yourself completely, getting moving will improve your thinking.

A happy body frees up the brain

A blatantly obvious, yet sometimes overlooked matter of pure fact, is that the brain is a part of our physical body. 'That's where it lives,' says Anna Pihl, who has helped thousands of overweight people achieve a happier body. 'For as long as we live, we depend on having a functioning connection between body and mind, and we can be grateful that the brain sits above the stomach – both literally and figuratively speaking!'

If the body is not in a good place, the brain is unable to realise its potential. If we're cold, unwell or in pain, suffer from Christmas dinner coma, are hungry or thirsty, exhausted, stressed out or ill, the brain doesn't have optimal conditions to do its job, partly because some of our attention keeps being diverted by the emergency signals the body is sending. Perhaps that's why some people think so well in the bath and I come up with things in the shower? The body is well taken care of and the brain whirrs away, humming as it goes.

EXPERIMENT



If you are stuck, take a brisk walk or get moving in any other way that suits you. What you do doesn't matter, as long as you increase your heart rate and the flow of blood to your brain.

Simply letting the brain work away on its own tends to be at least as effective as thinking about the problem. When your mind has found a solution, it will let you know.

How did it go? Did you find any new angles or ideas?

Rubbish bin

Stop trying to do two things at once

Can multitasking make you more efficient?

No.

It doesn't work now and it never has. If you want to be more efficient and think better, do one thing at a time.

IQ of an eight-year-old

When I run Thinking Environment programmes, I sometimes ask: 'If you want to reduce the IQ of a Harvard graduate to the level of an eight-year-old, what would you do?' So far, no one has come up with the answer.

It's really simple. You give the person two things to do at once and hey presto, they have the problem-solving ability of an eight-year-old.

More efficient?

I was working away writing this book. It was a Saturday morning, and I hadn't bothered to shut down my emails. An email with a Facebook update announced its arrival, and I clicked to see what it said. The update was about how to close down a

Facebook account, which seemed interesting, so I started reading. Five minutes later I woke up, wondered what I was doing and went back to writing. Sound familiar?

Another day I was working on a translation. Every now and then, the phone buzzed and I responded to messages. I was in great shape, felt really efficient and happy to be in touch with friends as I was working. The keys clicked quietly as I worked hard all afternoon.

Only at the end of the day did I discover how little I had accomplished on the translation. There was only one possible conclusion: time had gone to other things, while I thought I was being efficient.

Research supports that conclusion. If you want to perform well and get a lot done: turn off emails, social media and your phone, shut the door and put 'Please do not disturb' on the door. Bodil Jönsson, who wrote the thought-provoking *Ten Thoughts About Time*, called it 'undivided time'.

We fool ourselves

Do you keep your computer open during meetings, and perhaps respond to emails during the meeting? Many people do, and believe they are doing two things at the same time.

As a matter of fact, they are not. They are going back and forth between different tasks, and as a result, they risk missing important information and compromising decision quality. Furthermore, it takes them longer to respond to the emails than it would if they were fully focused.

We don't even have to look at our cell phone to get less value from a meeting or a dinner. When it's lying in front of us, it entices us to look at it, and we have to spend some of our valuable attention *not* looking at it.

Scientists have studied how cell phones affect having dinner with friends. Of the 300 people in the survey, half were told to have their cell phone visible and within reach, since they would receive a message during dinner. The others were told not to have their cell phone visible. Those who had their mobile visible found the dinner less valuable than those who had not.

Another study found that college students perform less well at tests if they have their cell phone visible during class, and yet another study shows that college students perform less well at tests if they have their cell phone *in their pocket*, even if they do not look at it. If they leave their cell phone outside the room, they do better, just by not having the phone about their person.

We simply do not have enough attention to focus fully on more than one thing at a time. When a part of your brain wants to sneak a look at your phone, you are not fully present. Decisions suffer and socialising becomes less enjoyable.

'Constantly having to ignore the impulse to pick up the mobile phone is not a passive act for the brain, and whatever we may believe, we are by nature useless multi-taskers,' says psychiatrist Anders Hansen.

Nancy Kline calls it 'Digital Slavery': to be the obedient servants of electronics. We sacrifice vital things, including our relationships, on the altar of electronics. It's simply not possible to be fully present, or to think clearly, when a phone or tablet is in front of us, because it signals that at any moment, as soon as the next notification shows up, the other person or the issue will become unimportant.

Bedroom threesome

A couple went for marriage counselling.

'My feelings just aren't the same any more.'

'We ran out of love.'

The marriage counsellor asked some questions and eventually got to the classic:

'What about intimacy?'

'We aren't as close as we used to be. I wonder whether it might be because of our phones.'

'Your phones?'

'Yes, we always bring our phones into the bedroom, because sometimes we get an important text message and then we have to answer.'

'Do you mean you have your phones in your bedroom no matter what you are doing?'

'Oh, yes. Our managers expect us to be available at all times.'

The counsellor made a huge effort not to show how old she felt. For a moment, her mind seized up. Then she managed to croak:

'How do you think that affects intimacy?'

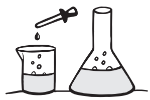
Autopilot vs. attention

One of my neighbours and I often go for a walk around the lake. One Sunday, we thought we would take a different route. We stood still for a moment to decide which way to go, and then set off again – walking and talking about work. Suddenly, we discovered that we had taken our usual route, because we were fully focused on the conversation and our feet kept calm and carried on – as usual.

Have you ever planned to go shopping on your way home, and then, when you pulled up outside the house, realised that you forgot, because you were talking on the phone or listening to music, or started thinking about something else? It's the same phenomenon: when our attention is in one place, our body automatically continues with its habits.

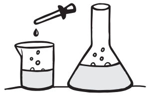
Every now and then, I seem to think that I can do things that come automatically to me while I'm talking to someone. But what is it like for the other person? When I'm on the phone and start doing something else, very often the person I'm talking to will suggest that we end the call. If I return my full focus to the conversation, their interest usually picks up again.

EXPERIMENT FOR MEETINGS



- In digital meetings, ask participants to close down all other programmes and notifications.
- In physical meetings, leave electronics outside the room.
- Should someone be expecting an important message, if possible, ask someone who is not attending the meeting to take care of their phone and come in if necessary.
- If anyone needs to take notes, try using a flipchart. If this is not possible, try switching off Wi-Fi on the computer used for note taking, and make sure no other programs are open. (But flipchart is still better.)
- At the end of the meeting, talk about: how did leaving out phones and computers affect the meeting? Do we want to try this way in our next meeting as well?

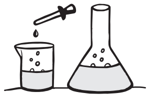
EXPERIMENT WHEN YOU NEED TO GET SOMETHING DONE



Switch off telephone, email and other notifications.

How did it work out?

EXPERIMENT AT HOME



Switch off the phones when you are having dinner.

How does that affect the atmosphere around the dinner table?

Rubbish bin

Peeking through the iron curtain

Polarisation is a myth.

Nancy Kline.

What if the most important perspective is the one I don't have?

Maryse Barak

From confrontation to contact

Immediately, tension snapped into place.

We had spent a lovely day at Henley, listening well to each other, enjoying a sense of shared values and ways of being. Then we struck the climate issue. Two people held entirely different views, and everything just froze.

One person thought the debate was exaggerated, there was too much fuss about the climate, she thought it had all gone too far, while the other thought the issue was so important that it deserved all the attention it was getting – and then some.

'Would you like to think about this issue?' asked Nancy Kline, who was chairing the meeting, 'because if so, let's review our agreements so that people can relax and think for themselves.'

They were to have three minutes each, back and forth, for a total of up to 30 minutes, and they promised each other two things:

- ☆ *I will stay interested in what you will say next.*
- ☆ *I will think for myself about the question, not repeat old truths or finished answers.*

Fascinated, the rest of us listened, as the thinking went back and forth, and within 20 minutes we had begun to discern areas in which they agreed. The strained atmosphere, which was palpable when they started, had relaxed, and when the time was up, they even managed to smile, look each other in the eyes, and say a quality they appreciated in each other.

Using the same agreements, people have thought about Brexit (in England), and Trump (in the US), and in both cases the process has delivered constructive results.

When you listen in this way and *think*, rather than dishing out the prefab, you begin to understand each other better, and sometimes you even find yourselves partially agreeing with each other. The purpose is not to agree, but to increase understanding. Only when we're in real contact with each other can we understand each other's perspective and begin to thaw polarisation.

Exploring other ways of looking at an issue may take courage, but it can be liberating to discover that perceptions are just that – perceptions – and not a core part of one's personality. Debate will bring neither innovation nor invention, so if you want to gain new insight – as a group or in an organisation – your most important act may be to relinquish debate and discussion, and instead start thinking together.

Ice breakup

In the summer of 2019, the city of Stockholm asked for some climate scientists to be in a central square for a couple of hours every Monday, to answer citizens' questions about the climate. I was there to help with communication. One Monday, a man in his 70s came up to us. Leaning on his crutches, he said:

'I love what you're doing, but it's too late.'

The climate scientist listened. The man, whose name was Alejandro, continued talking. He talked and talked and talked and talked and we listened and listened and listened, but we were getting nowhere, and it was getting painful, so I asked:

'Could we try something?'

The gentlemen agreed to take three minutes each and really *listen* to each other and *think* about the issue. When they had had a total of 2 x 3 minutes to talk and the same amount of time to listen, the situation went from quite polarised to a warm feeling of: 'What a lovely person.' We parted as friends. The whole thing took twelve minutes.

'The cause of polarisation is not disagreement,' says Nancy Kline, 'the problem is that when we encounter a perception that is significantly different from our own, in areas that are important to us, we become so threatened in our core identity that we shut down.' Just as in the theatre, when the iron curtain descends to protect the audience from fire on stage, our iron curtain slams into place and we lose touch with each other. In this sense, polarisation is a myth: the real issue is how we deal with our defences.

Since part of us wants to shut down, listening to understand can be a challenge, but the results make it worthwhile. When people do not feel threatened, they think better, and they listen better. Tension can often be eased by appreciating something positive in the other person, or by saying something that brings a smile or a laugh. What might work depends on the circumstances.

For my own part, I once asked a Member of Parliament from a political party as far removed from my own views as possible, to tell me his thinking about the climate issue.

'The problem is that there are so many people on Earth, and they want our standard of living,' he said.

I was within a quasihemidemisemiquaver of losing all my good intentions right there, and starting to argue with him, but I reminded myself to keep thinking, 'I can listen to you. Although I absolutely disagree with you, I can listen.'

'We have to think about where we get the most bang for the bucks,' he said. 'The best thing may not be to spend money to reduce our own emissions, because the money may have greater impact if it's invested elsewhere.'

'We can help out with Swedish technology,' he said, 'which will grow Swedish industry.'

The entire conversation took about ten minutes. Some of what he said I didn't agree with at all, some of it I thought had a point. With my mind somewhat expanded I thanked him for his engagement and his time. I wouldn't say that he is one of my best friends, but he is more human to me than he was before I approached him.

A few years ago, I was given an hour with four members of Iceland's Parliament. They tried Rounds and Thinking Pairs (Thinking Pairs: see the chapter 'Give someone time to think', page 37). Afterwards, one of them said to his colleague from another party: 'I've got to know you in a completely different way today than I did before.'

Behind the political party façade is a person I can relate to.

What would politics and other contexts be like if everyone listened to all different perspectives, without thinking about what they were going to say when it was their turn? If everyone tried to understand and see the value of everyone else's contribution, without lying in wait with a battle-axe at the ready, prepared to jump out and bash the 'opponent'?

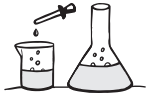
When has anything been improved by excluding a person or group? When has exclusion made someone kinder, more adaptable, or easier to work with?

Just because I listen to you, I don't have to agree with what you say. I don't even have to like you. But I might grow a little wiser and better able to understand how someone can think the way you do. And when I know that I don't have to protect myself from what you say, I can meet you as a human being.

Every now and then, I have thought to myself that someone was unbelievably dim. On almost every single occasion, it turned out that there was an important point that I had missed.

'What if,' says Maryse Barak, 'the most important perspective is the one I don't have?'

EXPERIMENT 1 – EXPANDING YOUR OWN UNDERSTANDING



- Find someone who is likely to have an opposite view to yours on a subject that matters to you.
- Ask them with genuine interest what they think on that issue and why. Keep wondering what more they think, so that you are listening to understand, not to argue to change their mind.
- While they are talking, think over and over again as you listen: 'I can listen to you, even if I don't agree with you' or 'I am not like you, I am just like you.' (In other words, even if we have different opinions, people largely want the same things. Thinking in the way suggested is a way to stay connected, in order to understand).

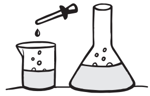
How did it go? How well were you able to listen? Did you learn any new way of looking at the issue? How did the session affect your relationship?

Watch out!

It's all too easy to misplace your good intentions and start arguing – and if the situation was awkward to begin with, that's as nothing compared to how bad it can get. If you have promised to listen and not to interrupt, it's important to keep that promise.

If you want your perspective to be included in the conversation, ask instead if you can take three minutes each, back and forth, and listen to each other without interrupting.

EXPERIMENT 2 – UNDERSTANDING EACH OTHER

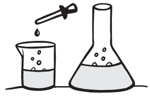


Choose an issue where two people have completely different opinions on a topic that matters to them.

- Suggest that they agree to:
  - stay interested in what the other will say next, and
  - think for themselves about the question, not repeat old truths or ready-made answers.
- Ask them to take three minutes each, back and forth, for a total of up to 30 minutes.
- At the end, ask them to appreciate a quality in each other.

How did it go? Did they understand each other better? Did their relationship improve in any way?

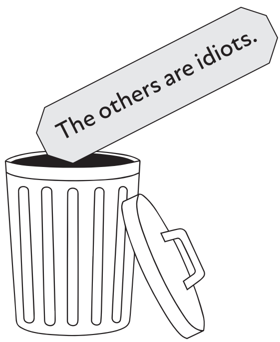
EXPERIMENT 3 – DEBATE AND DIALOGUE



In a group, suggest that you:

1. Debate an issue for a certain number of minutes. (Taking this to extremes, offer a prize for whoever wins the debate.)
2. Do Thinking Pairs (see page 37) and a Round (see page 69) on the same question.
3. Reflect on the experience. What was similar and what was different? How did thinking develop? What do participants now think about debate and dialogue? Is your work generally characterised by debate or dialogue? How does that affect the quality of work and your enjoyment of the workplace? How do you want things to be in future?

Rubbish bin



The speed of ease

In material terms, we are better off than ever before in the history of humankind, yet we continue to stress ourselves out to do just a little more. Not only does this undermine our wellbeing: the quality of our thinking and decisions suffer as well.

Motto: 'I would have achieved more if I hadn't been in such a hurry.'

Be where you are

The manager was as tense as an elastic band just before it snaps. Brought up to please, and, above all, to Do Her Duty, she stood in the doorway of the conference room, halfway in, halfway out.

Before she made her presence felt, the atmosphere had been relaxed and pleasant. People seemed to be enjoying each other's company and to be interested in what they were about to engage in. Now they froze.

'Welcome,' said the facilitator. 'How nice that you want to join us.'

As the words were leaving her lips, she realized that this was very far from the truth. It wasn't nice at all, and the last thing the manager wanted to do was to join them. Gone was the pleasant, open atmosphere and the team members looked worried about what their manager was going to say. The manager looked like a four-year-old who wants to leave the party NOW, before the party even gets going.

'Now what am I going to do?' thought the facilitator. 'She doesn't want to be here and she *isn't* here. And she's so tense, that she'll ruin the experience for the others.'

'Do you feel that you have time for this?' smiled the facilitator. 'If you feel that you don't have time, then it's ok to leave.'

'Ah, thank you, no, I don't have time,' said the manager and left.

And the mood in the room lifted again. With interest and enthusiasm, they all got to work.

Infectious feelings

Without thinking about it, we're infected by the mood of others and we infect others with our mood. Perhaps we have always known that? Nowadays, we also know that our mirror neurons are at work.

'I know that if I take a few deep breaths before starting, it's infectious,' says Katja Fagerström, HR specialist and Time To Think Facilitator. 'And I know how important it is.'

A stressed person induces stress and worry in others, a relaxed person engenders ease. One person can alter the mood of a whole gathering.

A few summers ago, a very young great-nephew came on a visit to Time To Think Facilitator Jeanette Forss. Leon doesn't like riding in a car. He screams until he turns blue in the face, and the closer the family was getting to departure time, the more stressed everyone was getting.

'I suggested that I could give him something to eat,' says Jeanette, 'but I noticed that I was stressed out and he found no peace in eating. That's when I realised that *I can infect him with my ease*. So I pulled myself together and took a *really* deep breath – and he relaxed, and ate and fell asleep, they put him in the car seat and left. He always wakes up immediately, but it took ages before they called, because he slept like a log all the way, three solid hours.'

The paradox of ease

But doesn't a sense of urgency have value? Don't you get more done if you hurry up?

Weeeell, not exactly.

For the brain to function optimally, it needs a *tiny* amount of tension.

Stress, however, impairs our ability to see the whole picture, to think clearly and to learn new things.

And since the quality of everything we do depends on the quality of thinking we do first, we need ease to think and to create. A classic in terms of efficiency is when we achieve a lot, but later discover that we were busy doing the wrong things. We didn't take the time to think about what is really important, and we didn't take the time to think through the best way forward, we just started *doing* something.

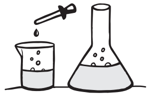
In today's society, ease is a scarce commodity. In material terms, we have abundance, but we don´t seem to have time to breathe, and that affects how well we think. The quality of decisions suffers when stress has strangled imagination, creativity and the ability to take in and consider all aspects.

Per Malmberg, founder of a major Swedish leadership consultancy firm, let a group of young managers try Rounds (see chapter 'Do a Round') in which everyone gets to speak, everyone really listens to each other, and no one interrupts. After the first Round, the only thing he added was: 'Let it be quiet for a little while before you pass on the opportunity to speak. Silence is ok.' After two Rounds, just about everything had been said. Instead of the normal two hours, the task took 45 minutes, including the silent bits.

'When we gave them another task later in the day, they wanted to do it again. They wanted that ease. They aren't used to it. These are young people of 28-35, who run and run and run and they loved the ease. I think many of them took it home with them and are wondering how on earth to include it in their everyday life.'

Every experiment in this book will increase ease. Here are two additional tried and tested ways to bring increased ease and focus.

EXPERIMENT – INCREASE YOUR OWN EASE



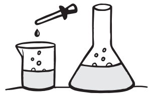
Take a few really deep breaths, all the way down to your toes. 'If you do it once,' says Maryse Barak, 'it won't make all that much difference. But if you do it every day, several times a day, you will notice a difference.'

She uses the word STOP to remember:

S top
T ake a breath
O bserve
P roceed

One of Maryse's clients put up Post-it notes here and there in his office, promising himself to stop and take a breath every time his eyes landed on a Post-it.

EXPERIMENT – MEETINGS



Start meetings with 30 seconds of silence, or even better, one minute's silence. You can close your eyes during the quiet, but it isn't necessary.

In my experience, those 30 seconds will improve the whole gathering. What was your experience? How did it affect you, your presence, focus and quality of thinking and decisions? How did it affect others?

Rubbish bin

Win – win

When we compete, we focus our energy on winning against *each other. Many of us have grown up with competition as if it were a given – the natural and normal framework of life. If we encourage each other instead, we can build on each other's thinking to find the best way forward.*

Lose – lose

'And we thought they were going to give us a standing ovation.' Lennart is in full flight, mid-story. He's an engaging storyteller and an intelligent man, with a great sense of humour and profound understanding of human behaviour.

I should have been right there with him, in the middle of the story of how to engage a regiment in development.

Instead, I was in my own head.

What was I going to say when he stopped talking? What story did I have that was as good as his, or preferably even better? A story that showed off how competent I was, even though I was a new member of staff and only 33 years old?

This was back in 1988, and we were having lunch in the former national military headquarters. I'm sure it wasn't the first time I went looking for a story that could match, or preferably be better than, the one that was just being told.

But it was the first time I noticed what I was up to.

'Helsinki'

For 30 years I've been a member of a small group where we help each other with life's challenges. In that group we really listen to each other. For many years now, we have had a name for a common phenomenon. Let's call it 'Helsinki'.

'Someone tells you they have been to Helsinki,' said Stefan Bruce, who was the first one of us to notice the phenomenon. 'Straight away, someone else cuts in and says "Helsinki? I've been there lots of times. I remember…". And that person carries on, and the original speaker never gets a chance.'

'Helsinki' means that someone interrupts and takes over, often to cap, impress, win, to be the biggest, the best, the most impressive.

It's so common that many of us hardly notice when it happens every day, at work, in boardrooms, among friends and acquaintances, and in families.

'I'm the youngest of four sisters,' says Anna Pihl. 'We talked a little louder and a little faster, and then the next one interrupted and talked a little louder and a little faster than that. We ended up with whole lot of competition and I'm sure it triggered our desire to self-assert.'

If competition has been part of us since we were little, is there any point in trying to do anything about it?

'I've been a world champion interrupter,' continues Anna, 'but the ease when I back off…! These days, I love being able to finish what I'm saying, thinking, and being quiet with somebody else who is also quiet, and it doesn't feel threatening or weird – just easeful and natural.'

'I haven't lapsed into my old ways for some time,' says Diana, who is the oldest of four siblings, 'but on a course a few years ago, I noticed during the first few days that I was going along with the culture of that organisation, which was to compete. And I didn't like myself.

'So I couldn't sleep on Monday night and Tuesday night, and on Wednesday morning I decided that I was going to change my behaviour, to be the person I want to be, let others grow, just say things that I thought would add something to the group, not say things just to show off how wonderful I am.'

'I only opened my mouth when I really had something to contribute. That way, I could let others grow too.'

'Competing against another business might be ok, but competing internally will only make us see others as either above us or beneath us, and nothing good comes of that.'

Competition and envy

One of my Thinking Environment colleagues says she notices that she's competing when she finds herself thinking:

'Why have they got that, and I haven't?'

When she thinks like that about someone, she feels a little unpleasant twinge in her tummy every time the person's name comes up in conversation. Fortunately, she has found a way to deal with it.

'If I can create a more generous and loving and excited feeling in my mind, I can move away from that and think, for instance about you and this book: "You have this book, can I promote it, can I do everything in my power to help that book be a success?"'

'If I can think that,' she continues, 'I won't have that horrible flinch in my tummy when I think of Monica's book, I will think happy thoughts instead. I can't wait for it to be published, so I can promote it to my friends.'

Beyond competition is a win-win.

My daddy is stronger than yours

For young children to say *My daddy is stronger than your*s or for small boys to compare the size of their willies may be relatively innocuous, but when competition is the name of the game in families, working groups, boardrooms and political debate, quality of thinking suffers.

When we focus on who is best, decisions will not be as good as if we put all our energy and intelligence into building on each other's thoughts, together creating new pathways and finding the best ways forward.

Where competition is razor-sharp, no one is safe. In cut-throat competition, who would dare to suggest anything new, something beyond the familiar, even if it might hold the potential for great gains?

Where there is competition, at least one party loses. Often, everyone does.

Improv has cracked the code

To get an idea of what encouragement looks like in practice, go and watch a performance of improvisational theatre. Improv has a few cardinal rules, and breaking them is no joke.

The first rule? To affirm others' suggestions.

A number of one man shows, each trying to stand out from the others, is not how you build an outstanding performance: the performance is created together. Remove 'but' from your vocabulary and replace it with

Yes, and

It's as simple as that.

In theory.

Do as grandmothers do

In 2013, Sugata Mitra won a TED Prize for his work on 'School in the Cloud', where children teach themselves with the help of a computer. Once, he left a computer in a remote village in the Indian countryside, with children who spoke no English. The task: to learn biotechnology.

After two months, the children had gone from 0 per cent to 30 per cent understanding, which is extraordinary, but not enough to pass the test. So Sugata Mitra asked a young accountant to help them.

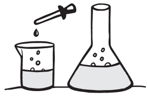
'Absolutely not,' she said, 'I didn't do science at school. I've no idea what they're doing all day.'

'I'll tell you what,' said Sugata Mitra. 'Use the method of the grandmother. Stand behind them and admire them all the time. Whenever they do anything, you just say *Well, wow, I* *mean, how did you do that? Wow, when I was your age, I could never have done that.'*

She did that for two months and their scores went up to 50 per cent, which is what a rich school in New Delhi was getting – with a trained biotechnology teacher.

Degree or no degree, grannies are onto something.

EXPERIMENT



Notice when you start competing. You can tell, because you will be thinking about what to say that might impress people. (Also notice when others say 'Yes, but' and 'No, but'.)

Build on the thinking of others. Listen and answer with 'Yes, and', based on the value of the other's contribution. If you have objections, leave them until you have built on the positive.

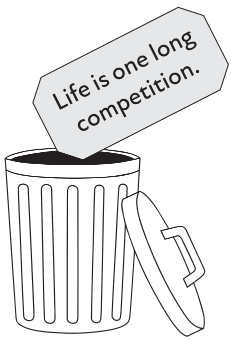
How did it affect the result? How did it affect your relationship?

Watch out!

To have a 'yes – and' attitude is innocuous, but if you start telling others that they should stop saying 'yes – but' you are likely to wish you hadn't. If you want to change the way you work together, it's usually best to talk about it at the beginning, when you're deciding on ground rules, and before anyone has said 'yes – but'.

If you've missed that boat, try a neutral time, at a safe distance from undesirable behaviour.

Rubbish bin



Stop giving advice

We ask for advice, but we don't really want it. Not even two-year-olds want advice. We may, however, need information in order to think well.

'You ought to read this!'

We were standing in front of my aunt's bookcase. I was 14 or 15 and had been borrowing spell-binding books from her for years, from her old set of *Anne of Green Gables*, read so many times that they were falling apart, to Jane Austen, Dorothy Sayers, and Josephine Tey.

'You ought to read this!' said my tiny, dynamic aunt, holding out a book. My aunt was one of the most important people in my life.

Any interest I might have had in it went straight out the window. 'I *ought to* read it,' I thought to myself. That one, tiny word turned me right off. No way was I going to read it.

It happened more than fifty years ago, but the incident is still so fresh in my mind that it pops up when I'm looking for a story to illustrate the importance of not giving advice.

Supposing she had said instead, as she had on so many similar occasions, something like:

'I enjoyed this; I think you might like it.'

or

'How about this?'

'I really like this.'

'This one is very exciting/fun/interesting.'

Any one of them would have changed the outcome.

Food for thought

We don't like advice. Bizarrely, we ask for advice quite often, but when it comes down to it, we rarely want anyone else to tell us what to do. Not even two-year-olds want to be told what to do. In fact, two-year-olds are particularly averse to anyone deciding for them, and there's a two-year-old in all of us. 'No,' says the two-year-old, sticking out its tongue, 'Won't. Not going to, so there.'

We may however, both want and be able to use information that others have, if it's served up as a food for thought. The art is to present the information in an appetising way. Best case, the information is delivered in a way that shows deep-seated conviction that the person who is asking for advice thinks best for themselves.

If you provide the information so that it's exactly that – information – inviting the person who has asked for advice to think about it, *the information becomes part of the person's own thinking*.

'My experience has been … Is there anything in that which might be useful to you?' 'This is how I think … what do you think now?'

There is a world of difference between:

‘If I were you, I would …’

and

‘'Speaking for myself, if *I* were in your position, *I* would …’

The latter way of putting it makes it clear that it would suit me and my way of going about things, but that it may not suit you at all. It gives you space to think for yourself and to figure out what would work for you.

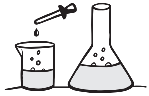
‘With the best intentions in the world, we have a tendency to assume that others are like us, which is almost always untrue,’ says my colleague Lennart Lindén, acclaimed speaker on leadership.

‘Giving advice is like offering somebody else your spectacles,’ says Lennart. ‘And then, when the other person still can’t see, we tell them: “I’ve had these for two years and they’ve always worked. They’re expensive too. You just aren’t making enough of an effort. Please try to be a little grateful and try again!”’

You’re much more likely to use the solutions that you come up with than any advice I give you. And this is just as well, because the solutions you come up with are far more likely to work well for you, because they’re rooted in who you are, and build on all the explicit and implicit information you hold.

Watch out!

There are times when someone really wants to know what you think. If at that point you insist on going: ‘No, no, what do *you* think?’ you may be downright provoking. The other person may need to hear what you are thinking in order to have something to take off from – and may then come to the conclusion that they *really* don't want to do *that*. The skill lies in saying what you think without giving advice, leaving the field wide open for the other person to think completely differently.



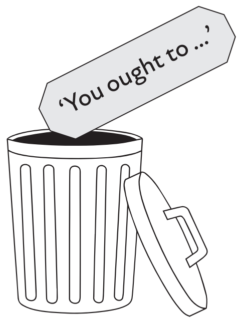
EXPERIMENT

When someone asks you for advice, ask them what they think: 'I would be happy to tell you what I think, but would you first tell me what you think?' When you know what they think, it will be easier for you to supply any missing information.

If they still want advice, provide information.

How did it go? Did they come up with something useful? How do you think it affected their self-image? How did it affect your relationship?

Rubbish bin



Accurate information for all

Accurate information is essential to good thinking. We know this, but we often pretend that we have all the facts, when a moment's consideration and a dash of openness would produce better results.

When there's an elephant in the room, it's better to talk about it, because the conclusions will never be more robust than the underlying information.

How often do people sit in meetings and waffle, filling the air, just in order to say something? Perhaps to appear clever? Or to seem knowledgeable? And no one says what needs to be said:

'Actually, do you know what, none of us knows what we're talking about. Should we go and get the guy or the girl who's an expert on this, or should we all go away and read a book, or go on a course, and then get back together, so that we know what we're talking about?'

Something along those lines is what Fiona Dawe usually says when she talks about how important it is to have accurate information when discussing and making decisions. You might think that it goes without saying, but reality will prove you wrong.

I'm talking because I don't know

Fanny works for a young company started five years ago by a founder and a small group of enthusiasts. It's now grown to the point where the know-how that was adequate to get the company off the ground no longer suffices to run it: when a company has reached a certain turnover, for example, someone needs to know how to keep accurate accounts, no matter how complex they are.

The problem is that people are afraid. No one dares to admit that they don't know, because the threat of punishment hangs in the air. So the people in charge do a lot of talking without having a clue what they are talking about.

When people are scared, they don't think well, and even if they think well inside their own minds, you will never know, because they dare not say. The result? Decision quality goes down. Fear is expensive.

Using the experiments in this book will contribute to greater safety and thus to better thinking and higher quality of decisions and results.

Well-informed decisions – 1

Back in 1983, when I was working for a management consulting firm in London, we landed an assignment from a US corporation.

'We want you to find us a company in the office supply industry in Europe, so we can acquire it.'

Right. Fine. As long as you're paying, we'll get on to it, right away, Sir.

A number of expensive consultants, including me, set out to survey what companies were available, analyse them, and travel Europe to meet them. I was just short of 30, terrified and frightfully impressed by the fact that there I was, flying about the world with a new, shiny, burgundy-coloured briefcase. Our work naturally cost a pretty penny, but the client corporation was huge and well-heeled, and paid us with a fraction of their billion-dollar profits.

After a while, however, I began to wonder. Why did they want to buy a company in the office supply industry? Our client was in a completely different industry, that had nothing whatsoever to do with office supplies. It was as if British Steel had an urge to buy an ice cream factory, or Toyota were suddenly irresistibly interested in mosquito nets.

Finally, I couldn't stop myself, so I asked an older colleague, who was in direct touch with the client:

'Do you know why they want to buy into the office supply industry?'

And that's when he answered:

'Their biggest competitor has just acquired a company in that industry, and they think the competitor knows something that they haven't figured out yet.'

So this billion-dollar corporation was going to buy a company based on the fact that their competitor had bought a company in that industry. Rock solid basis for a decision? I don't think so.

Well-informed decisions – 2

Roy, the rising star, whose MBA was being paid for by the company, presented proposals for the company's focus and strategy to the management team. I was listening in, because I was to facilitate the management team's three-day teambuilding.

Roy made his presentation and then asked the questions he had come to ask. After a while he found reason to check:

'Has everyone read the documents I sent out ahead of time?'

'Oh, yes,' they all professed.

After a short discussion, the management team took a decision that I can no longer remember, but I do remember the unpleasant feeling at the pit of my stomach. 'That's weird. Is that really a good decision?' I didn't say anything, because it wasn't my role.

The decision resulted in quite a fuss across the company, and after much upheaval and extensive negotiations with the unions, management had no choice but to backtrack.

And, of course, it turned out that quite a few people *hadn't* read the documents, but no one wanted to say so, so a lot of information was missing when the group made its decision.

Looking back, it occurs to me that if I, who didn't belong to management and was not clear on the background, still thought that the decision seemed strange, then I would bet my bottom dollar that there was at least one person in the management team who thought so too, but didn't dare to say so, and who thereby withheld important information from the others.

Information and denial

Information has two aspects. One is obvious: that everyone has access to accurate information. If the management team is going to talk about the company's future development, everyone needs correct information. There's no point in HR being present if only the business area managers have the necessary information. With the right information, both IT and HR may bring new perspectives, but it's not uncommon for representatives of the non-business departments to sit in, without being expected to say anything, and unable to contribute because they don't have the information they need.

Should you always share everything you know, regardless of the situation? Not necessarily. But by becoming aware of what you are holding back and why, you can make a conscious, informed choice about whether or not to speak up.

There's information that you cannot share – corporate secrets such as the Coca-Cola recipe or confidential details ahead of a company going public, classified military information and much more. But there's also information that can be freely shared, and that brings openness and clarity and enables everyone to contribute.

The second aspect of information is what we know, but deny that we know. In personal life it can go like this:

'No, no, she doesn't have a drinking problem, she's just so tired when she comes home in the evening that she falls asleep on the kitchen floor.'

or

'He's a lovely man and it's been a long time since he hit me. He loves me.'

Of course, denial also occurs in organisations.

At the bottom of companies' truly catastrophic corporate failures, says Fiona Dawe, lies denial. Denial of information that they have, but which they, more or less consciously, pretend not to have.

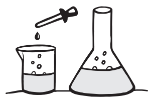
What changes our way of thinking?

Time and time again, denial shows up in our history, from refusal to accept that the Earth is round and the Sun is at the centre of the solar system, to the denial of evolution, continental drift, concentration camps and the climate crisis. I imagine that denial is especially common when new information challenges established truths and systems. The new information is so threatening that we push it away, without even realising.

Generally speaking, information is in itself not sufficient to change the way we think and behave. But if we sit down together and *think,* and use all the behaviours described in this book including correct information, then completely new things can emerge.

When we think together in such a psychologically safe environment, we can come up with new ideas, giving us a better quality of life and future.

EXPERIMENT



When discussing or making decisions, make sure everyone has all the necessary information.

First work out the question you need to think about. Then:

- Ask: 'What do we not know about this?' Let everyone say what they don't know.
- Possibly ask:
  - 'What do we already know, that we don't fully acknowledge?'
- Give everyone time to think and full attention in one or more Rounds (see p. 69)

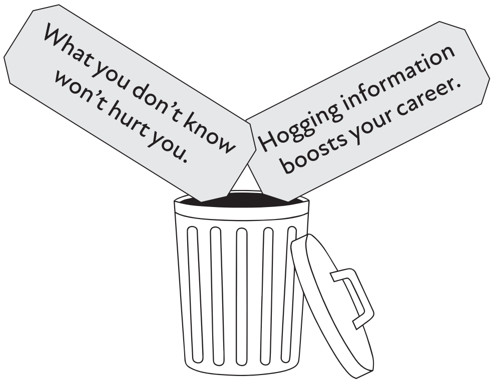
Did that clarify things?

Watch out!

Can't you keep anything to yourself?

Some information is private (for example, children rarely want to know anything about their parents' sex life) and some is irrelevant. The information referred to here is the information we need in order to think about the question we're addressing.

Rubbish bin



Accessing collective intelligence – The Thinking Council

A group of people make one person a gift of their experience and best thinking. First, they promise not to give advice. No matter what the topic, it works.

As described in previous chapters, asking a question and doing a Round in a Thinking Environment will give access to collective intelligence in a broad range of contexts.

The purpose of a Thinking Council is to let one person, the Presenter, get the benefit of other people's thinking and experience on a topic specific to the Presenter, in a safe space that enables them to keep thinking for themselves. Thus, there is a promise of:

- confidentiality
- superb attention
- no interruption
- no advice

Instead of advice, group members provide food for the Presenter's thinking.

A Council differs from a meeting, because in a meeting the results and next steps are 'owned' by more than one person, usually by the whole group. In a Council, the Presenter 'owns' the topic, in the sense that the topic is the Presenter's own and the Presenter alone decides how to proceed after the Council. Council topics can be anything from the deeply personal to how to deal with tricky work situations.

Since giving advice is ruled out, the council is a safe space for the Presenter. It's also a safe space for council members, since they know they will get their turn, that they will not be interrupted, and that they will receive the finest attention from everyone in the group. Because of this, council members are able to access their best, most rooted and creative thinking in service of the Presenter, and each person's thinking can build on previous contributors', enabling the group to access collective intelligence. In all the years that I've used Thinking Councils in groups, I've never known it to fail – it brings in excellent results every time.

Getting out of the war zone

Fraught and tense, dinner time at Victoria's house had become more like a war zone than a friendly family meal. The cause: her 18-year-old son was trying to avoid choosing subjects for his final school exams, and his parents were trying to influence him.

Victoria had tried everything she could think of to influence, persuade, cajole and beg her son to commit. Every time the subject was raised, the situation got worse.

Having presented this scenario, and what she had done to try to fix it, she asked the other members of the group: 'In your experience, how have you influenced your children to take a direction that you felt was best for them?'

One by one the other members of the group shared experiences of similar or even near-identical situations and how they had navigated them. No one told her what to do, they simply shared their stories and what had worked, or not, and how they had made peace with the variety of outcomes they had experienced. All were giving star-quality attention, and, as always, no one interrupted. After four people had spoken, it was the turn of the most junior person in the room, a young man in his early twenties who had recently joined the team.

'I've never been a parent,' he began 'but I have been parented!' He then related how he had wanted to get engaged and marry his first girlfriend after they hadn't known each other for very long, and his parents had pressurised him to wait. 'The more they pressurised, the more we wanted to go ahead.'

'Then,' he confided, 'one evening at dinner my mother said she'd been thinking it over, and she'd realised that it wasn't her place to control the outcome of my life, that I was an adult now, even though I was a young one, and that she couldn't protect me from the unique journey that my life would be.'

His mother had also said that maybe he would marry this girl, maybe they would be happy together for the rest of their lives. Maybe they wouldn't be, and they would break each other's hearts and part ways and he would regret his haste, or maybe – even if the marriage did fail – he would have no regrets.

'She said she knew who I was, and that I had solid values and I lived by them and she'd decided to trust me to trust my inner compass and to do whatever I thought was right, and that she would stand by me every step of the way. She apologised for making me feel like I couldn't be trusted to know my own heart, and that no matter what, even if it turned out to be a mistake, she knew I would learn from it and make the best of my life in my own way.'

By now the young man was clearly emotional as he remembered the impact his mother's words had on him – how moved he'd been by her trust.

Victoria was similarly moved. The young man said nothing further. He didn't say what he had decided, and he certainly didn't instruct the mother to trust her son: he let the story stand for itself.

Now that everyone had had their turn, it was time for the mother's freshest thinking.

'I feel as though a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders! I thought it was just me, but your stories have let me see that these kinds of tricky situations occur for all of us, in all our families.'

Turning in particular to the young man she said 'dinner this evening is going to be very different, I can feel it in my bones. I can't say yet that I'm fully ready to trust him, but I know that's what he needs from me, and I will fake it till I make it, so that he can start to feel his own sense of responsibility and make choices for himself.'

Thank you, Trisha Lord, generous, insightful and super-competent creator of Thinking Environments, for this fabulous story.

Saving a hospital

The director of the hospital was deeply concerned. His face was drawn and his body tense as he told us of the major bumps in the road and down-right opposition the project to build a new hospital had just hit. The first part of the road towards building a modern hospital to replace the worn, no longer very functional hospital from 1907 had been smooth, but now that the project was beginning to look like reality, he was hitting flak that he simply didn't know how to deal with. At stake was the finest specialist care in the country for their area of expertise.

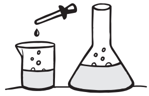
'Help me,' he said, 'what am I going to do?'

The group consisted of four executives/senior managers from different organisations and different areas of expertise. With confidentiality as a cornerstone, the group has been meeting for a number of years to help each other with issues they can't turn to anyone else about. Apart from the hospital director, no one had any experience of hospital management or major building projects.

I no longer remember the detail of what followed, but I know that we asked him to phrase the question he wanted us to think about, and I know that the Thinking Council performed. At the end of a few Rounds, in which everyone got their turn and we gave each other full attention, the director was a new person. Relaxed and confident, he thanked us.

And every time I pass that new hospital, I think of him and of that Council.

EXPERIMENT

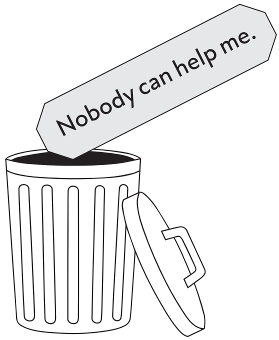


If the group doesn't yet know the purpose of a Thinking Council, give them the information they need (see the introduction to this chapter).

- ➢ Ask who has a topic on which they would like the others' best thinking.
- ➢ Ask the group members to promise:
  - » not to interrupt each other
  - » to give their finest attention
  - » to maintain confidentiality
  - » not to give advice. (See pp. 154–156 on the difference between giving advice and providing food for thought).
- ➢ Ask the Presenter: 'What do we need to know in order to help you with your topic?' and let the Presenter give the group this information.
- ➢ Ask the Presenter what question they would like the Council to address.
- ➢ Ask the Council if they understand the question and do a Round inviting any questions about the question.
- ➢ Give Council members two minutes to write down their initial thoughts.
- ➢ Ask who would like to start, and do a Round. Say that it's all right to pass and get your turn at the end of the Round.
- ➢ At the end of the Round, let Council members make any additions they like to their notes.
- ➢ Ask the Presenter: 'What's your freshest thinking now?'

- If there's time and the group is small, ask the Presenter if they would like more if there is more. If they do, ask them whether the question is the same or if they want to change it and then do another Round of Council members and freshest thinking from Presenter.
- Ask Council members to appreciate a quality in the Presenter and to add that to their notes.
- Ensure the notes are given or sent to the Presenter.

Rubbish bin



Thinking Couples

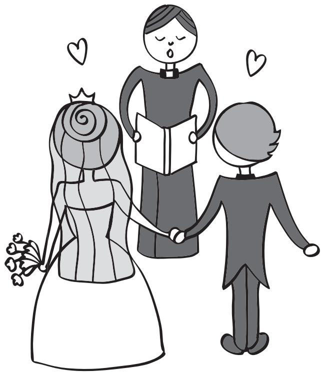
If we look into each other's eyes, really seeing each other, five minutes a day can keep a relationship going.

I promise to listen

When we fall in love, we look lovingly into each other's eyes, have long conversations and listen for hours, because we are interested in each other and want to understand who the other person is.

Then we get married and that's the end of the fairy tale. Often, right there. The humdrum of daily life takes over.

For many couples, profound listening dies an untimely death somewhere between the dishwasher and the washing machine, or between who's taking



'Say after me: "I Daniel, take you, Felicia, to be my wife. I promise to listen to you with my full attention, without interrupting, for at least five minutes a day, until death do us part."'

the kids to piano practice and who's cooking, when both are stressed out and exhausted on a grey, windy day in late November. Many couples get divorced, saying 'We ran out of love.' As though the amount of love were something determined from the outside, something over which we have no influence.

Escaping the never-ending cycle

A classic dynamic in couple relationships is a vicious cycle, in which *she* complains about *him* and he pulls away. He withdraws, perhaps shutting himself in the garage, going out for a run, or just going incommunicado. She feels even more lonely, and grows even more accusatory. The spiral continues downward.

Beneath the surface she feels abandoned, burdened with responsibility, not met, and she wants to talk. He feels incompetent and inadequate, and retreats to protect himself.

'For many men, a core value is to be competent in the eyes of their woman, so it's hard for him to face a woman who makes so many accusations,' explains Gunnar Wallin, engineer, management consultant and psychosynthesis therapist. 'Meeting isn't possible: there's only attack and defence.'

But it's possible to break the vicious cycle:

'Dare to listen a little longer, without saying anything about what's being triggered in you. When you listen in this way, you don't set off each other's defences the way you do in a normal argument or discussion,' says Gunnar.

How can we keep loving?

How can we manage to really see each other every day, so that we can continue to love and feel loved? How do we show love?

When my husband and I were married, the minister said: '*Love isn't something you feel, it's something you do.*'

There are many ways to show love. A very simple way is to give each other uninterrupted time, a few minutes every day, or longer every now and then – or both – and listen with complete interest in your partner. What do they think and how do they feel? And what more?

Just sitting there won't do it. Nor will solving their problem for them – another classic cause of relationship friction. It's all about *how* you listen.

Magic materialises when the listener does two things:

Promises not to interrupt or say anything until their partner asks them to.

Lets go of their own ideas, questions and suggestions, and instead gives their full attention to their partner. If ideas keep popping up anyway, the listener lets them go, comfortable in the knowledge that if they're important, they will come back.

Three couples which have tried this are Gunnar and Therese Wallin, Hanna Wetterstrand and her Sebastian, and Shirley Wardell and her husband David Faraday. They apply it in slightly different ways, but all three couples have found it to be of immense value.

In love again

'A couple of times a year, we go somewhere for a relaxed half a day together, usually to some sunlit and quiet café where we feel safe. We take equal time and listen to each other,' says Gunnar.

'We know that we can keep thinking without being interrupted by the other's ideas. If my thoughts trigger something in her, she'll talk about it when it's her turn.

'The bond between us grows stronger because we can be quiet without losing the other's attention – she doesn't disappear into her own thoughts, or out into the world, just because I don't say anything. I don't have to fight to keep her attention, to stay in focus. When I'm released from stress and the feeling that I need to perform, that's when I can really feel deep down: "What is this really like for me? What do I really need?"

'When my partner gives me her complete attention, it makes our relationship stronger and that's just as important as what I am thinking. The signal is: *To me, you are important*; you're important because I give you my attention and don't go away.'

The effect is twofold. Listening and being listened to strengthens your self-esteem, making you feel valuable. Gunnar also sees another major advantage for men:

'All you need is patience and attention, which means I can put aside everything I know when I'm listening; I don't have to go into my male "Mr Fix-it" mode.'

Listening gives access to your partner's world of thinking, which is always important, and crucial if there is discord or friction. You get insight into the way your partner thinks, what the current situation connects up with for them, and how serious a situation is. You don't have to guess and make up scenarios, which may be totally off the mark.

If you can listen without judging, things surface sooner, before they grow infected.

'When you give your partner the space to follow their own thoughts and associations, they become transparent, and that increases trust and safety. I understand what's important to her and that strengthens our relationship too.'

Focused listening doesn't have to take half a day or several hours. Ten or even five minutes' listening to your partner can be enough if you do it on a regular basis. You can ask, quite simply, how their day has been. Or even: 'How are you today?'

'Listen to the answer. The other person feels heard and understood and wants to listen too.

'Some people say, "We don't have time to talk to each other". Many times, it isn't about time, but about quality and intention. If you look into each other's eyes and really listen when you meet in the hall in the morning, all of a sudden you have a relationship.'

Once a year or every six months, you may want to go to a nice place and think about issues you don't find room for when you are engrossed in everyday life, more far-reaching questions, such as: What is important to you in the next few years? How do you want us to live? What makes you happy? What do you think about our relationship, what would you like to develop?

'I'm surprised at the pent-up need to talk about these issues,' says Gunnar Wallin.

He admits that he sometimes has the feeling that he 'would have nothing to say' if he sat down with his Therese in a café.

'That's a sure sign that I've been working too hard, that we haven't seen enough of each other, or that there's been too much busyness at home with the family project.

‘The gift of being listened to, of being given the space to think, creates the self-confidence and the urge to think about things that you’re normally not aware of. But those are, I think, often the thoughts that attracted you to each other in the first place. Who are you really, behind all your busyness, behind your everyday personality? What do you long for? When we listen to each other, we fall in love again, just like before all the projects took over.’

Kitchen table conversation

‘We really try to avoid working in the evenings,’ says Hanna Wetterstrand, agronomist, facilitator and mother of two. ‘So, when the kids have gone to sleep, we always take some time together. We sit on either side of the kitchen table and one of us starts talking about something and the other listens. It can start off with something fairly unimportant, but often ends up with a more profound conversation.

‘Sebastian really cares about letting me finish speaking. He hardly ever interrupts me, and I don’t interrupt him, and when we do, we notice and apologise and ask the other to continue.

‘Neither of us likes suggestions about what to do, but we can ask each other questions that make the other go deeper or move ahead, or we can say something that relates to ourselves. Questions out of our interest in each other, which can help the other think further. Quite often we ask what the other thinks.

‘It creates such respect and affinity and connection between us, because we are both so interested in how the other is really doing.

‘It also means that I take the time to think about how I really feel. Quite often, he asks me 'So how does it feel? How do you feel?' and he gives me his complete attention and listens and takes it in and is loving about it and it's absolutely amazing, it really is amazing, because we have challenges in that we are quite different on many levels, but we meet in this, that we have a genuine love for each other, and we really want the other to be happy, and want to understand the other and what happens in the other person's thoughts and feelings, and what needs are going through them, and care about giving each other the space they need to be in a good place.

'It's become a well-integrated part of our lives and it's absolutely fabulous for our relationship.'

Introvert meets extrovert

When Shirley Wardell met David Faraday, they had 37 days to go before Shirley was to give birth to her baby.

'Our fifteenth date was the birth,' says Shirley. 'During those 37 days we listened to each other for hours at a time, to be prepared to have a child. If the child saw David as her father – and she does – then I wanted to be sure he would remain in her life.'

'If you could do it again,' I wondered, 'would you do anything differently?'

Shirley took a deep breath and was quiet for a second or two.

'I love what we did,' she said. 'It's been fabulous. When he proposed, he said: "Shirley, would you share your daughter with me?" And that showed that he'd understood, because I thought, as I think all mothers would, that if you can't do the job as a father, then it doesn't matter how much I like you, I have to protect my child.

‘We’ve succeeded because we listened so well. For him, it wasn’t “Too bad I come second, after the child.” He’d understood what was most important to me, and what it meant: first, you get to share my daughter; and second, we share our lives with each other. Wonderful man. I wouldn’t change a single thing.

‘As a rule, we think together about once a week. We set a timer and take five minutes each, back and forth, for about an hour. When there are bigger issues that we need to plan or prepare for, we take a longer turn each – maybe up to an hour thinking – while the other listens and doesn’t interrupt.’

The only thing the couple has ever quarrelled about is – you got it – how to raise a child. The question is emotionally charged and they have different ideas on what is best. While Shirley is more permissive, child-focused, listen to the child, David feels that you have to set clear boundaries. Somewhere along the way, they realised that everything they believe and want and prefer about child rearing stems from their own upbringing, and that actually, they had no idea about what works and what doesn’t, what’s good and what isn’t.

‘We solved it by listening well to each other, five minutes at a time, back and forth, and could explain why we thought the way we did, the philosophy behind our impulses, what we wanted, and what decisions we made,’ says Shirley.

By listening to each other – thinking together – they decided they would take a decision and see how it worked.

‘Without Thinking Pairs, I don’t think we would have stood a chance,’ says Shirley, who is extroverted while David is introverted. (Thinking Pairs, see experiment on p. 37.)

To begin with, David would bring well-thought-out suggestions, and it was difficult for Shirley to influence something that was good, but in which she felt she had no part. She asked that they would think together first, before he went further in his thinking.

To ensure that they both get the same amount of time, they set a clock for five minutes each way. Before they introduced the clock, he talked significantly longer than she did, which made her feel inferior.

'Now, it's become part of our culture as a couple that we listen well to each other and if we haven't done it for a while, we feel that we've lost touch a little.'

After 20 years of marriage, they still think together, generally at least once a week: *What's up for you, what do you think and feel?* When planning any major project, they will think together several times a week.

'The more I get to know him, the more I love him. For us, listening is a way to show love.

'When we don't do it, we miss it,' says Shirley.

Oiling the squeaks

'We get caught in pitfalls too,' says Gunnar Wallin, 'but I think we're probably pretty good at cleaning things up when we've disagreed. When you're upset and see the other as a perpetrator, it's difficult to listen well.

'When we've calmed down, or when some time has passed, we address it: "What really happened? How can we prevent this from happening again? What do we need to understand about each other that we don't already understand?" We sit on the couch, and one begins and the other listens and then we change roles.

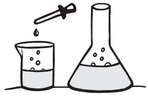
'Even though I've worked with these things all my life, I still become a prisoner of my own wounds, but it's always possible to turn it into something valuable afterwards, when I can see a little more clearly.

'When you've listened beneath the surface for a while, new concerns don't show up all that often. We've got to know each other well enough now, so that these days few things surprise us – there aren't so many "wow, I didn't realise this was such a sensitive issue for you." It never goes to the level of serious collision. You become more constructive together, you can anticipate situations better, and you become more flexible in dealing with what comes up, because you know what's important to the other.'

'If there's been any conflict between us, where things have felt difficult, we always let one of us say everything they're thinking,' says Hanna Wetterstrand. '"What do you think and feel about this situation?" Then the other one talks, and that's usually all that's needed.

'It's always *so* much worse when we don't do that.'

EXPERIMENT



Suggest to your partner or a good friend or colleague that you listen to each other and give each other time to think. First, one of you speaks and thinks, while the other listens with their full attention without saying anything. Then you change roles.

- ➢ Promise each other not to interrupt.
- ➢ The Thinker can be silent for some of the time, or even all the time.
- ➢ Give your full attention to the person who is thinking. If the listener has an idea that's really important, it will come back later, when you change roles.
- ➢ Take equal amounts of time. Start with a few minutes each and extend the time when you have got used to it.

Many people find this a little awkward at first, but get used to it and find huge value in thinking for themselves, knowing that they will not be interrupted.

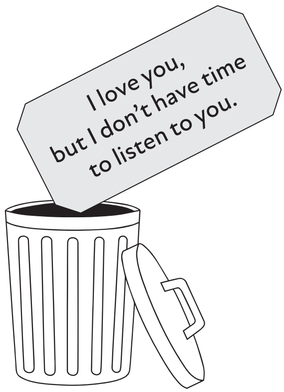
Watch out!

If neither party is able to listen, talking about a conflict can make it worse. My husband and I always ask each other: 'Are you able to listen?' If neither of us can listen, we go to bed instead, and talk about it on the following day, when we are rested.

In the Gustafsson family, where everyone has been an elite athlete, the go/no go question is instead: 'Have you eaten?'

The basic idea is the same: to resolve a conflict, at least one party needs to be able to listen. If no one can listen, it's better to wait until someone can.

Rubbish bin



What do you think?

It's time to come to a close.

What do you think now?
What might be useful to you?
What might you like to try?
How might you go about it, that would work well for you and in the context you're thinking about?

Where in your life would you like to see something that's (even) better?

What do you think?

APPENDIX 1

Where does the Thinking Environment come from?

Like many other valuable insights, a Thinking Environment was born out of a question. The person asking the question was author and educator Nancy Kline.

'What is the one thing which, if it were to change, could change everything else for the better?'

The answer arrived as quickly as the question: The quality of people's independent thinking. Why? Because:

The quality of everything we do depends on the quality of thinking we do first.

If that is true – and so far, I haven't met anyone who disagrees – then it becomes interesting to find out: How can we help people to think for themselves, with rigour, imagination, courage, and grace? When do people think well and independently?

For nearly 40 years, that question has driven Nancy Kline's research. With passion and precision, she has tried to discern and understand the conditions necessary for people to think well. With time, it became clear that the quality of our thinking depends on how we are being treated by the people with us while we are thinking.

Grossly simplified: if I treat people as if they are idiots, I will be surrounded by idiots, whereas if I treat people as if they are intelligent people who have interesting things to contribute, I can be surrounded by geniuses.

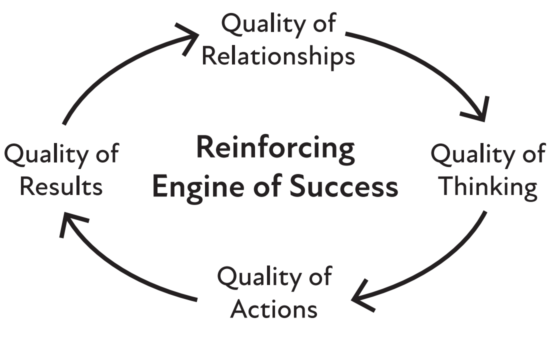
The ten behaviours that create a Thinking Environment (see pp. 17–19) are the result of decades of empirical research. Current independent research in the fields of psychology and neurology is now demonstrating that a Thinking Environment gives the brain the conditions it needs to function well (see Appendix 2).

APPENDIX 2

What does research say?

David Rock holds a PhD in the neuroscience of leadership and has written four acclaimed books. In *Your Brain at Work*, he summarises what the brain needs to function well. On point after point, the research he cites demonstrates the value of the ten components of a Thinking Environment. For more information, visit https://www.klarhet.se/. Under *Tänkandemiljö* you will find eight pages of excerpts from *Your Brain at Work*, showing research findings related to the components of a Thinking Environment.

Additional confirmation comes from researcher Daniel Kim's Core Theory of Success.



Daniel Kim: A Core Theory of Success

When something needs fixing, we often head straight for what to do. But if we want to succeed, Kim suggests, we need to start with the quality of relationships, because they determine the quality of thinking, which in turn is the basis for choosing the best actions to get good results.

A Thinking Environment starts in the right place, providing the simple, practical ways of being with one another that create good relationships and high-quality thinking, making the workplace, family and associations places where we like to be.

APPENDIX 3

The value to organisations

'Don't be fooled by the fact that it's so simple, because the simple is the ingenious, and this is ingenious,' says Anders Sundin, CEO of IT company Sokigo and much appreciated chairman of a wide range of associations.

'Creating a Thinking Environment pays off so quickly and the investment is so tiny, that you can hardly even call it an investment. It gets you better quality decisions in less time. If you slash fifteen minutes off every meeting – that's a lot of money!

'Many of the issues we face are also so complex that you need full access to all different perspectives and skills to solve them,' he adds. A Thinking Environment enables that full access.

Open and transparent

Dirk De Smaele, Global Head of Chemical & Pharmaceutical Development and Supply at the Janssen Pharmaceutical Companies of Johnson & Johnson, also emphasises that one should not to be deceived by the fact that a Thinking Environment is so seemingly simple.

'I went through Nancy Kline's book and thought: "Really? That's it? Is this not something that I could have perhaps come up with myself?" The concept is so deceivingly simple that it's at risk of being paraphrased or put in a corner with 'this is for people that hug trees' – especially in a scientifically focused organisation such as ours.'

Dirk has also noticed that letting everyone speak and be heard in a Thinking Environment makes it easier to go ahead with difficult decisions. 'When people know that they have really been heard, they find it easier to accept decisions – both those they support and those they may not.'

A Thinking Environment is a framework for people to become more open and transparent with what they think, adds Dirk.

Improved productivity, reduced staff turnover

'If you succeed in creating a Thinking Environment, it will increase productivity,' says Karen de Villiers, experienced leader in a 15,000 people financial services organisation. The wisdom in discussions is so much greater, she notices, meetings are shorter and more productive, and there is much better thinking because the agenda has been sent out a week in advance and designed as questions.

It can improve the bottom line in other ways too. 'If a Thinking Environment is successfully implemented, it will reduce staff turnover,' says Karen. 'People leave because, they say, "I'm not heard, I don't know the value I'm adding, I don't understand my role here."' In a Thinking Environment, people feel heard.

Anders Sundin agrees: 'We do exit interviews with everyone who leaves the company, so we know that we've lost some people who should have been allowed to shine, and feel a little more seen. When people are seen and heard, they become braver and more creative, and they stay longer with the company because they're happier at work.'

In another company, employee satisfaction increased by as much as 30 per cent for managers who met with team members one-on-one and listened well, as is done in a Thinking Environment. Did it increase by the same amount for all managers in the organisation? Nope, the managers who didn't have such meetings with their staff scored no such improvement. Great listening pays off.

'I love my growth in your space,' said one of Karen's team members. 'You allow me to really think.' The space is a Thinking Environment.

Far better meetings

As described earlier in the book, a Thinking Environment makes meetings more effective and engaging in a number of ways.

This goes for meetings in all kinds of spheres, including the university world. 'In the past, one would come in to a meeting with an outcome in mind and "fight for it" without listening to one's colleagues. Now we listen to each other and therefore make better decisions about strategy: the decision evolves, becomes collective and much stronger than if a single individual had "won" the battle and got her or his original idea through,' says Professor Alasdair Skelton, who was, for nine years, one of the two directors of the Bolin Centre at Stockholm University.

Surveys in Sweden and other countries show that people generally think that a large part of the time they spend in meetings is wasted. With the help of a Thinking Environment, time saved can turn into bottom line profit.

'For the individual company, these wasteful meetings cost an annual SEK 80,000 [about £6,000] per staff member, just in salary costs,' writes CEO of Svenska Möten Sylvia Nylin after a survey of a thousand Swedish employees from different sectors. The survey shows that as much as 50 per cent of all meetings were perceived to be ineffective, costing the organisations £14 billion in salary costs alone – every year.

So, from a purely financial point of view, there are big gains to be made. Add to that the increased commitment when meetings have a clear focus, and everyone gets to speak and be heard.

Anders Sundin also finds that there are often too many people in meetings and that the way to deal with this is also found within a Thinking Environment. When each participant has the space to develop their thinking, it may become clear that this isn't the meeting – or even the context – in which they make their best contribution to the business. If the agenda is sent out well in advance, as is recommended in a Thinking Environment, the recipient can also sometimes see ahead of time that it would be better to ask someone else to attend. So both the individual and the organisation can save time, energy and commitment – and money, of course, if the waste occurs during paid working hours.

The Nordic countries' manager of yet another company notices that those who used to say nothing in meetings now contribute their ideas, and that this improves decisions and increases commitment.

As Joakim Crafoord, former head of Radiology at Ersta Hospital in Stockholm, says: 'It works.'

APPENDIX 4

Nancy Kline

For nearly 40 years, author and educator Nancy Kline has been seeking to answer a question: *How can we help people to think for themselves, with rigour, imagination, courage and grace?* The result of her quest is a Thinking Environment.

Through her work and her company Time To Think, a Thinking Environment has been established as the culture in companies and organisations in more than twenty countries worldwide, including the UK, US, Canada, South Africa, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands, Ireland, Australia, Brazil, India, and Singapore.

Nancy Kline is a guest lecturer at Henley Business School, and has contributed to leadership development at Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford. She also coaches business leaders and teaches coaches how to generate a Thinking Environment in their coaching. Her books have become key elements in many coaching development programmes. Her on-going research continues to inform and refine our understanding of how to create Thinking Environments in the world.

Her books on the Thinking Environment have sold over 100,000 copies worldwide: the 26-year-old best seller *Time To Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind*; *More Time To*

Think: The Power of Independent Thinking; and *The Promise That Changes Everything: I Won't Interrupt You*.

Nancy is a warm and inspiring human being with a razor-sharp mind and an exquisitely honed ability to give her full attention to ignite the thinking of others. While she always stays true to her convictions, she invariably treats her fellow human beings with the greatest respect and interest. She never interrupts except in emergencies (and they don't seem to happen to her).

Nancy, who is from the US, has lived in the UK for many years because her husband, Christopher Spence, is English.

All the experiments

Stop interrupting

- Let people finish.

What happens for you? How does it affect others? What happens to the quality of decisions?

Listen while someone thinks

- Ask someone if they want you to listen to them while they are thinking. When someone asks you for advice, ask what they think.
- Switch off anything that might disturb and interrupt, such as computers and cell phones. If possible, shut the door. People think on a completely different level when they *know* that they will not be interrupted.
- If suitable, tell them that you will not say anything at all until they say that they are finished and that, if they say they are finished or that they need something from you, you will probably be asking: 'What more do you think, or feel, or want to say?' Make sure that you can 'hear the commas' – that there is a little pause after 'think, … feel,'.
- Ask: 'What would you like to think about and what are your thoughts?' That simple question focuses the thinker's attention. It can make a big difference.
- Listen as though you are about to discover the innermost se-

crets of the universe. Be fascinated by their thinking, and by the wonderful, brilliant person in front of you. Or think of a quality in them that you appreciate. Keep your eyes on theirs – in our culture that's a way of showing that we are interested. The person thinking is likely to move their eyes around a lot, but when they return from their thinking excursion, there you will be, with your eyes on theirs, giving them your full attention. This will give them fresh energy so that they can continue thinking.

The better you are at giving your full attention, the fewer times you will need to say anything.

A safe place to think is one of the most precious gifts we can give one another.

Thinking Pairs

- Invite a friend or colleague to try Thinking Pairs.
- As your starting point, use the experiment above: 'Listen while someone thinks.'
- Promise to give each other full attention, not to interrupt and not to comment (unless the thinker specifically asks for the listener's thoughts).
- Promise each other not to tell anyone else what the thinker has been thinking, and also never to ask the other about the Thinking Session, or what happened afterwards as a result of it. The thinking is the property of the thinker. We think all the time. Knowing that they will never be held accountable in any way for what they say in a Thinking Session allows the thinker even greater freedom to think for themselves.
- Share the time so that you get equal amounts of time to think.
- When one person is finished, ask: 'Would you like to write anything down?'
- When you are both done, appreciate a quality in each other (see chapter 'Appreciate someone').

How did it go? Did you make headway with your issue? Did your Thinking Partner get anywhere with theirs? Have you got the taste for it and want to do the experiment again, perhaps once a week? What did it feel like to appreciate a quality in the other and to be appreciated? How did that affect your feeling about the session?

Give appreciation

- Choose somebody you want to give appreciation: a colleague, someone in your family, a friend – anyone. Even people we are not fond of usually have some positive quality.
- What is a quality in them that you appreciate? Make sure that you genuinely appreciate what you are going to say.
- Find a good time and say it.
- Do it again, with a new quality. And again.

How does it affect your relationship? How does it affect your collaboration?

Ask a question

- Choose a topic on which you would like to know what other people think.
- Figure out who should be invited. Who can contribute on this issue?
- Phrase the item as a question. The question should be directed toward the purpose: what do I want to achieve at this time? Why am I raising this now? Do I want to find alternatives? Do I want to gain support? Do I want to make a decision? Do we need new ideas for solutions? Do I want us to agree? The wording of the question matters.

Listen to what people think. They may surprise you.

Do a Round

- ➢ Decide on the question on which you want everyone's best thinking. Without a clear question directed towards the desired outcome, you are likely to get a lot of unfocused talk.
- ➢ If appropriate, mention that it's important to regard everyone as equal thinkers, even if there are differences in age, role or status.
- ➢ Ask participants:
  - » to give their full attention to the person who is thinking
  - » to promise not to interrupt
  - » not to think about 'What am I going to say when it is my turn?' because they will figure that out when their turn comes
  - » to pass the turn on to the next person by saying: 'What do you think?' Or 'I'm done'.
- ➢ Also mention that:
  - » it's fine to sit quietly for a while and let the others' suggestions sink in before saying anything
  - » it's fine to pass, and get your turn again at the end of the Round. You can then decide whether you want to say anything or not.
- ➢ Consider setting a time limit of one, two or three minutes per person. If you decide on a time limit, ask participants to set their phones to flight mode and clock their own time. If someone in the group has a tendency to be long-winded, a time limit can be invaluable.
- ➢ Decide whether to go clockwise or counter-clockwise. When you are all in the same room, you can go clockwise in one Round, and counter-clockwise in the next. In virtual or hybrid meetings, it's best to stick to one direction, to avoid confusion.
- ➢ Ask who wants to start. In families, you can choose to let the turns go more informally, as long as everyone gets their turn. In other contexts, it's generally preferable to decide in advance to do a Round, in turn.

Positive opening

- Start off with a positive question. Suggest that everyone says their name and then responds to the question for the Round, e.g. 'Alfred. What makes me smile today is …'
- Explain that you don't have to think about what you are going to say when it is your turn, because you will figure that out when it is your turn.
- If you have limited time, stress that it is important to be succinct in order for everyone to get the chance to speak. You can set a limit of max x seconds or max one minute, or ask for a very short sentence.
- If you have plenty of time, you do not need to focus on just 'one thing' but can ask the question more broadly, for example: 'What do you appreciate about this group?'
- Enjoy taking in what each person says. Shared joy is a double joy.

When everyone knows how it works, you may want to ask the group who would like to propose the question for the opening Round.

Rounding up – meetings

End a meeting by doing a round on the questions:

- *'What is one thing you take away from this time?' (or 'What has been valuable about this meeting?')* and
- *'What is one quality you appreciate in the person on your left [or right]?'*

If you are very short of time, ask for just one word.

Rounding up – at home

End the day by saying something positive to family members. If you have had a rough day, it is more important than ever. Even if you were furious earlier in the day, what is a quality in them that you appreciate?

How do you feel after telling them?

Listen to a young person

- Choose a question on which you would like children's or young people's thinking. Or just start listening.
- If necessary, make sure they have adequate, accurate information. Often, they have all the information they need. They know and understand far more than many adults think.
- Listen with interest. Don't interrupt.
- At the end, see what happens if you tell them a quality you appreciate in them. (More on appreciation in the chapter 'Appreciate someone'.)

Ask yourself 'What do I feel?'

- When you notice that you can't think clearly, ask yourself, 'What do I feel?' If possible, say the answer out loud.
- If that didn't help clear up your thinking, ask someone to listen while you verbalise what you are feeling.

What do we feel?

- If a whole group has reason to be angry, afraid or sad, everyone can think (in a Round) about: 'What do you think or feel about x?' Since the question is about both thoughts and feelings, it's not as challenging, nor as directive, as asking 'What do you feel about x?'
- If that doesn't free up thinking, see next experiment, on Assumptions.

Laughter relaxes and frees up thinking

Laughter relaxes the atmosphere.

- If appropriate in the context, try to start meetings with a question or something else that brings laughter (see the chapter on positive opening rounds, 'Opening Up').

Prison break from assumptions

When you get stuck, or when you are sad, angry or frightened, ask:

- ➢ What am I assuming that stops me from (or 'that makes me …')
- ➢ What am I assuming that is most stopping me from (or 'that makes me …')
- ➢ Do I think it is true? What are my reasons for thinking that it is true (or untrue)?
- ➢ What can I assume instead, which is true and liberating?
- ➢ If I knew [what is true and liberating] how would I [reach my goal]?

A place that welcomes you

How can you make the place signal 'Welcome. You are important and your thinking is valuable'?

For instance: What is the best place to meet? Should I bring flowers? Candles? Set out comfortable chairs in a circle? Something to eat or drink that the participants will appreciate and that's appropriate to the gathering? A hand-written greeting?

If you are stuck, get moving

If you are stuck, take a brisk walk or get moving in any other way that suits you. What you do doesn't matter, as long as you increase your heart rate and the flow of blood to your brain.

Simply letting the brain work away on its own tends to be at least as effective as thinking about the problem. When your mind has found a solution, it will let you know.

Leaving digital distraction outside meetings

- ➢ In digital meetings, ask participants to close down all other programmes and notifications.
- ➢ In physical meetings, leave electronics outside the meeting room.

- Should someone be expecting an important message, if possible, ask someone who is not attending the meeting to take care of their phone and come in if necessary.
- If anyone needs to take notes, try using a flipchart. If this is not possible, try switching off Wi-Fi on the computer used for note taking, and make sure no other programs are open. (But flipchart is still better.)
- At the end of the meeting, talk about: how did leaving out phones and computers affect the meeting? Do we want to try this way in our next meeting as well?

When you need to get something done

Switch off telephone, email and other notifications.

Present at dinner

Switch off the phones when you are having dinner.
How does that affect the atmosphere around the dinner table?

Peeking through the iron curtain – expanding your own understanding

- Find someone who is likely to have an opposite view to yours on a subject that matters to you.
- Ask them with genuine interest what they think on that issue and why. Keep wondering what more they think, so that you are listening to understand, not to argue to change their minds.
- While they are talking, think over and over again as you listen: 'I can listen to you, even if I don't agree with you' or 'I am not like you, I am just like you.' (In other words, even if we have different opinions, people largely want the same things. Thinking in the way suggested is a way to stay connected, in order to understand).

Peeking through the iron curtain – understanding each other

Choose an issue where two people have completely different opinions on a topic that matters to them.

- ➢ Suggest that they agree to:
  - » stay interested in what the other will say next, and
  - » think for themselves about the question, not repeat old truths or ready-made answers.
- ➢ Ask them to take three minutes each, back and forth, for a total of up to 30 minutes.
- ➢ At the end, ask them to appreciate a quality in each other.

Debate and dialogue

In a group, suggest that you:

- ➢ Debate an issue for a certain number of minutes. (Taking this to extremes, offer a prize for whoever wins the debate.)
- ➢ Do Thinking Pairs (see page 37) and a Round (see page 69) on the same question.
- ➢ Reflect on the experience. What was similar and what was different? How did thinking develop? What do participants now think about debate and dialogue? Is your work generally characterised by debate or dialogue? How does that affect the quality of work and your enjoyment of the workplace? How do you want things to be in future?

Increase your ease

Take a few really deep breaths, all the way down to your toes. 'If you do it once,' says Maryse Barak, 'it won't make all that much difference. But if you do it every day, several times a day, you will notice a difference.' She uses the word STOP to remember:

S top
T ake a breath
O bserve
P roceed

Increase your ease - meetings

- Start meetings with 30 seconds of silence, or even better, one minute's silence.

You can close your eyes during the quiet, but it isn't necessary.

Win-win

Notice when you start competing. You can tell, because you will be thinking about what to say that might impress people. (Also notice when others say 'Yes, but' and 'No, but'.)

Build on the thinking of others. Listen and answer with 'Yes, and', based on the value of the other's contribution. If you have objections, leave them until you have built on the positive.

Stop giving advice

When someone asks you for advice, ask them what they think: 'I would be happy to tell you what I think, but would you first tell me what you think?' When you know what they think, it will be easier for you to supply any missing information.

If they still want advice, provide information.

Accurate information for all

- When discussing or making decisions, make sure everyone has all the necessary information.
- Ask: 'What do we not know about this?' Let everyone say what they don't know.
- Possibly ask:
  - 'What do we already know, that we don't fully acknowledge?'

When discussing or making decisions, make sure everyone has all the necessary information.

Accessing collective intelligence – Thinking Council

If the group doesn't yet know the purpose of a Thinking Council, give them the information they need (see the introduction to this chapter).

- Ask who has a topic on which they would like the others' best thinking.
- Ask the group members to promise:
  - not to interrupt each other
  - to give their finest attention
  - to maintain confidentiality
  - not to give advice. (See pp. 154–156 on the difference between giving advice and providing food for thought).
- Ask the Presenter: 'What do we need to know in order to help you with your topic?' and let the Presenter give the group this information.
- Ask the Presenter what question they would like the Council to address.
- Ask the Council if they understand the question and do a Round inviting any questions about the question.
- Give Council members two minutes to write down their initial thoughts.
- Ask who would like to start, and do a Round. Say that it's all right to pass and get your turn at the end of the Round.
- At the end of the Round, let Council members make any additions they like to their notes.
- Ask the Presenter: 'What's your freshest thinking now?'
- If there's time and the group is small, ask the Presenter if they would like more if there is more. If they do, ask them whether the question is the same or if they want to change it and then do another Round of Council members and freshest thinking from Presenter.
- Ask Council members to appreciate a quality in the Presenter and to add that to their notes.
- Ensure the notes are given or sent to the Presenter.

Thinking couples

Suggest to your partner or a good friend or colleague that you listen to each other and give each other time to think. First, one of you speaks and thinks, while the other listens with their full attention without saying anything. Then you change roles.

- Promise each other not to interrupt and not to say anything unless the thinker specifically asks for the partner's thinking.
- The Thinker can be silent for some of the time, or even all the time.
- Give your full attention to the person who is thinking. If the listener has an idea that's really important, it will come back later, when you change roles.
- Take equal amounts of time. Start with a few minutes each and extend the time when you have got used to it.

References

Stop interrupting

Doctors interrupt after an average of eleven seconds.

How Long Your Doctor Listens before Interrupting You. Bruce Y. Lee. https://www.forbes.com/sites/brucelee/2018/07/22/how-long-you-can-talk-before-your-doctor-interrupts-you/

Appreciate someone

The Power of Appreciation: The Key to a Vibrant Life. Dr Noelle C. Nelson and Dr Jeannine Lemare Calaba. Beyond Words Publishing, 2003.

The Appreciative Heart: The Psychophysiology of Positive Emotions and Optimal Functioning. R. McCraty and D. Childre. The HeartMath Institute, California, 2002.

Using a neuro-imaging technique called the SPECT scan, the doctors studied how appreciative thoughts and feelings affected blood flow to the brain. They found that less blood flows to the brain, particularly to the cerebellum, cingulated gyrus and the left basal ganglia when we are thinking critical thoughts. It flows to those areas better when we are thinking appreciative thoughts.

For every negative interaction during conflict, a stable and happy marriage has five (or more) positive interactions, shows research by the Gottman Institute. https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-magic-relationship-ratio-according-science/

The Gottman Institute, Washington: J. Gottman.

Opening up

Positive opening rounds at the beginning and end of meetings exercise the mind in noticing the positive. 'The more the same pathway is triggered the more certain does it become that it will be more easily triggered again. […] In this way repeated experience creates networked pathways and makes us creatures of habit.' Brown, Paul and Brown, Virginia: *Neuropsychology for Coaches*. Open University Press, McGraw Hill, 2012, pp. 12–13.

Rounding up

We remember what an experience was like at the end. *Thinking, Fast and Slow.* Daniel Kahneman, Penguin, 2012, pp. 378-381.

Stop trying to do two things at once

'… employees spend an average of 11 minutes on a project before being distracted.' *Your Brain At Work*. David Rock, Harper Business, 2009, p. 47.

'While the brain is exquisitely powerful, even the brain of a Harvard graduate can be turned into that of an eight-year-old simply by being made to do two things at once.' *Your Brain At Work*. David Rock, Harper Business, 2009, p. 4.

Smartphone use undermines enjoyment of face-to-face social interactions. Ryan J. Dwyer, Kostadin Kushlev, Elizabeth W. Dunn. Science Direct, volume 78, September 2018, pp. 233–239. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0022103117301737

'Dividing attention between an electronic device and the classroom lecture did *not* reduce comprehension of the lecture, as measured by within-class quiz questions. Instead, divided attention reduced long-term *retention* of the classroom lecture, which impaired subsequent unit exam and final exam performance. Students self-reported whether they had used an electronic device in each class. Exam performance was significantly worse than the no-device control condition both for students who did and did not use electronic devices during that class.' *Dividing attention in the classroom reduces exam performance*. Arnold L. Glass. https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2018.1489046

Even if they don't look at it, a smartphone in their pocket impairs college students' test results. Leaving their smartphone outside the room makes them more successful. *Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One's Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity.* Adrian F. Ward, Kristen Duke, Ayelet Gneezy och Maarten W. Bos. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/691462

On the blessings of ease

Mirror neurons. Joachim Bauer: *Warum ich fühle, was du fühlst: Intuitive Kommunikation und das Geheimnis der Spiegelneurone,* which means 'Why I feel what you feel: intuitive communication and the secret of mirror neurons'.

'[…] optimal level of arousal for making decisions and solving problems […] is a state of quiet alertness […] A small amount of over-arousal can result in your taking longer to do simple work or missing important insights.' David Rock, *Your Brain At Work*, Harper Business, 2009, p.130.

What does research say?

A Core Theory of Success. Daniel A. Kim. https://thesystemsthinker.com/what-is-your-organizations-core-theory-of-success/

The value to organisations

Running meetings in a Thinking Environment benefits not only the meetings. Emily Havers: *A study of whether, and how meetings held in a Thinking Environment® impact organizational life.* Précis of a Masters Research thesis, 2008.

Ineffective meetings, Sweden, survey by Svenska Möten.

https://www.mynewsdesk.com/se/svenska_moten/documents/mqi-svenska-moeten-73152

Ineffective meetings, UK:

'[…] professionals feel that two thirds of the meetings they attend are unnecessary […]. If UK professionals alone were subjected to fewer of these meetings, the economy could benefit to the tune of £45 billion.'

'[…] a third of professionals said they found themselves unable to contribute to the majority of meetings they were in, making their presence aimless, and showing over-invitation is a major waste of time at work.'
https://www.consultancy.uk/news/19960/pointless-meetings-set-to-cost-uk-economy-45-billion-in-2019

UK workers waste a year of their lives in useless meetings. This study of office workers' lives found 'only' a quarter to a third of meeting time to be wasted:
https://www.managementtoday.co.uk/uk-workers-waste-year-lives-useless-meetings/article/1175002

Further reading

Anders Hansen:
– *The Real Happy Pill: Power Up Your Brain by Moving Your Body*
– *The Attention Fix: How to Focus in a World that Wants to Distract You*

Johann Hari: *Stolen Focus*

Emily Havers: *A study of whether, and how meetings held in a Thinking Environment® impact organisational life.* Précis of a Masters Research thesis, 2008. Available at https://www.timetothink.com/

Bodil Jönsson: *Ten Thoughts about Time*

Daniel Kahneman: *Thinking, Fast and Slow*

Nancy Kline:
– *The Promise that Changes Everything*
– *Time to Think*
– *More Time to Think*

David Rock: *Your Brain at Work*

It takes a village to write a book

Nancy Kline has spent most of her adult life studying how to create the conditions in which people can think independently and well. Without her pioneering work and her generous encouragement throughout the writing process, this book simply would not exist.

It's said that it takes a village to raise a child and this much is certain: it has taken a village to get this book written. Profound thanks to Anne Hathaway, who opened the door to a Thinking Environment for me, Alf Hellström, Alasdair Skelton, Anders Sundin, Anna Pihl, Diana Sendlak Brundin, Dirk de Smaele, Elin Ljung, Elisabeth Ahremark, Eva Strömfelt, Fiona Dawe, Gunilla Strömberg-Pettersson, Gunnar Wallin, Hanna Wetterstrand, Heather Cresswell, Håkan Bertilsson, Jeanette Forss, Joakim Crafoord, Johan Henriksson, Karen de Villiers, Karolina Palmberg, Katarina Eriksson, Katja Fagerström, Kia Wulff, Maryse Barak, Michael Cahill, Nancy Kline, who gave constructive and encouraging feedback at every step of the way, Nicky Bush, Nils Schüldt, Paula McKenna, Peder Karlsson, Per Malmberg, Roy Bartilson, Sandra Hegge, Shirley Wardell, Trisha Lord, Ulla Stolt Gustafsson, Vivianne Thomsson. Many of you appear in the book, and all of you have contributed generously to it with your thinking, your experiences, your stories, and, perhaps most important of all, with your enthusiasm for the subject.