



Thinking Space

*My thinking is not your thinking
I can think for myself and so can you
I add quality to your thinking and you to mine
We may agree, we may not
Even if we do, inside that agreement we all have our own thinking*

Nancy Kline

An Introduction to Thinking Space

As already discussed the role and structure of facilitation is changing. Part of this is the responsibility of delivering transformational change and improved staff engagement. The story of organisations and what works has changed dramatically in the last thirty years, and cognitively there is an understanding that taking time to think, share ideas and involve people is a good idea. However, this is rarely translated into practice as mechanistic models, hierarchical power and influence from the old world are still very visible, and their impact felt. This links with the earlier thinking about “the organisation as a machine”. The impact of electronic communication, flexible working, and consistent demand to do more with less and do it better means there seems to be little space to embrace thinking in a new way to get new decisions, new engagement and real transformation.

At the heart of this approach is the creation of time and space to think and a belief that people can and will do that, when the environment and pattern of inquiry are designed as enablers to great thinking. This differs from meetings with agendas, team plans and performance conversations. It is a space and time that gets to the heart of thinking and feeling within the organisation and discovers how this can be harnessed to deliver real transformational change. The Thinking Space challenges the old world and creates space for ownership, engagement and personal accountability. Appreciative Inquiry is one kind of Thinking Space.

So what is the Thinking Space Philosophy?

People can think deeply for themselves and if a Thinking Space is created, that thinking can and will emerge. The facilitator is the catalyst. In this space the quality of the questions and the quality of listening are paramount. Listening values the thinking and the thinking improves, and as the quality of thinking improves so does the quality of decision making and planned action.

The Thinking Space is typified by:

- The thinker thinking for themselves
- The facilitator acting as a Thinking Partner; taking care of the thinking through attention, appreciation and ease
- The use of a specific framework for inquiry, including the Appreciative Inquiry 4D model and patterns of questions based on the work of Nancy Kline

Thinking Space has the capacity to engage large groups of people (up to 250 at any one time) or be used in one to one coaching and mentoring conversations.

In whatever form, at its core is the fundamental Nancy Kline question;

“How far can this person/these people go with their own thinking before they need mine?”

This naturally creates interesting challenges for all engaged in the process, not least the leader who is used to providing solutions, others who want it fixed and sorted and individuals whose voice may not have been heard and truly valued for some time.

Process

The process has its roots in living systems theory, positive strengths-based change, appreciative inquiry and conversational-based change. The process creates the space to have new and different thinking, different conversations, different decisions and actions and therefore a different future. The process is facilitated by taking people through layers of inquiry, using specific patterns of questions that encourage thinking that is void of blame, history and fear. Instead, the layers of inquiry illuminate personal responsibility, purpose and meaning, aspirations and desires and real actions and commitments towards transformation.

The Thinking Space process will:

- Surface connectedness based on listening, genuineness and not knowing
- Assume that a positive team and personal relationships are critical to business success
- Give structure to the emotional dimension of the work and the workplace
- Explore and make decisions around assumptions
- Surface doubts and commitments, moving the thinking decisions and action forward
- Encourage directness, authenticity and personal accountability
- Create the thinking that leads to real development/change for individuals, teams and the purpose of the organisation

Our Experience

When you create a safe space for thinking and ask meaningful questions, everyone will share their best thinking with each other enhancing the quality of everyone's thinking. Creating this connectedness is achievable, it is worthy and it is positive. Natural strengths are already there, and thinking shines a light on them. In being able to think together you find your business advantage.

The Business Case

Recent research from Gallup indicates that "World Class" organisations have 67% engagement within their workforce as opposed to the international average of 33%. In a resource, reducing economy organisations must connect on a real level with their people to survive and grow. This requires something different from facilitators supporting organisational development and change.

Making it real

Creating Thinking Space is not difficult and many of the ideas that we discussed around creating an Appreciative Facilitation are also valid here. Thinking Space is an additional collection of questions and ideas that you can use to engage with people and really hear their stories. It is all about the questions and the pattern in which you use them. In most instances you would have agreed on the membrane for the Thinking Space, so you would be thinking about a specific topic, situation, development opportunity etc.

At the heart of this are two of Nancy Kline's very specific questions:

What would you like to think about and what are your thoughts?

What more do you think or feel or want to say?

We already know that we carry assumptions with us and that these influence our thinking. These assumptions could be positive or negative. Either way it is helpful to get them out of our heads and into the light so that we can move forward in a more informed way.

What positive assumptions are you holding that are influencing your thinking?

What else are you assuming that is influencing your thinking?

What would you like to do with these assumptions now that you have brought them to the surface?

Equally, we understand from the work that we have done on Transactional Analysis that as leaders we need to spend more time in our Adult and curious Natural Child states when we are looking to support and develop people in line with their strengths.

What do you already hold as a strength that could support you/us/the project?

What one thing could I help you to explore further?

What do you need from me moving forward?

What decisions and actions are you taking now?

These are the “master” questions, you can use them anytime, anywhere with anyone!

What follows are specific patterns of questions created around the 4D model.

Pattern of Questions for 1-1 Coaching/Development Conversations

Guidance for the Thinking Partner

The following are the key points that it is helpful to cover before you start any Appreciative Thinking Space. We include them for your information, once you “get fluent” you won’t need to have them written down.

1. Before we begin it can be helpful to confirm that my role is to help you to do your best thinking, I will not interrupt you or verbally respond to your thinking
2. It would be helpful for me if we can agree how you will let me know that one wave of thinking is complete
3. Only when I am sure that you are ready will I ask you another question. That may be the same question I have already asked, or it may not
4. Either way my only desire is to help you to discover your best thinking

Discovery Pattern of Questions

1. What would you like to think about and what are your thoughts?
2. What more do you think or feel or want to say? (Repeat until you are sure the thinking is complete. I would normally say, I am noticing that you seem to be finished and just to be sure I will ask you again...).
3. What positive assumptions if any, are you holding that can help you get to where you want to be?
4. What other assumptions if any, are you holding that may be unhelpful in getting where you want to be?
5. What do you need to take a note of (including the positive assumptions) at this stage in our thinking space?

Dreaming Pattern of Questions 1-1

1. If I was to invite you to be really ambitious about possibilities, what would you like to think about and what are your thoughts?
2. What more do you think or feel or want to say? (Repeat until you are sure the thinking is complete. I would normally say, I am noticing that you seem to be finished thinking and just to be sure I will ask you again...).
3. What positive assumptions if any, are you holding and how are these assumptions influencing your thinking about possibilities for the future?
4. And what else are you assuming that is influencing your thinking about possibilities for the future? (Repeat until you are sure the thinking is complete for the moment)
5. What would you like to do with these assumptions? (It is fine to hold them at this point, and explore them further)
6. If you are choosing to hold onto and keep visible **x** as an assumption how does that influence your thinking about possibilities for the future?
7. If you are choosing to let that assumption go what usefully fills the space left behind? (How could you reframe these assumptions?)
8. What do you need to take a note of (including the assumptions) at this stage in your thinking space?

Design Pattern of Questions 1-1

1. What specific detailed statement(s) of success do you want to agree on and record for today's thinking session? (most helpfully, relationships and results should be considered)
2. How is what you have decided on influenced by any remaining assumptions (both helpful and limiting?)
3. What decisions do you want to make about those assumptions?
4. What would you like to think about now and what are your thoughts?
5. What more do you think or feel about the statements of success?

Destiny Pattern of Questions

1. Take a few minutes to reflect on your thinking space and on your notes so far
2. As you look at your collective thinking.....
3. What would you like to think about and what are your thoughts?
4. And what more do you think or feel or want to say?
5. Knowing that your thinking and doing could make a real difference, what could you commit to now?
6. What more can you commit to now? (to deliver between now and when we speak again)
7. What do you need from me?

Closing and Appreciation

1. My commitment to you based on what we agreed is.....
2. Our next conversation will be on.....
3. I would like to thank you for sharing your thinking with me and as a token I would like to say.....

Pattern of Questions for Meetings

Guidance for the Person Facilitating or Chairing the Meeting

The following are the key points that it is helpful to cover before you start any Appreciative Thinking Space. We include them for your information, once you “get fluent” you won’t need to have them written down.

Think about what the **Thinking Membrane** is for the meeting, what is the area/topic that you are inviting people to think about? Share this with the people in advance. It may also be useful to let people know that you intend to conduct the meeting as a Thinking Space. The ethos behind this is that listening to people with appreciation, attention and ease makes a real difference to how people feel about sharing their thinking. This way of facilitating meetings also ensures that everyone’s voice is heard and that there is a shared understanding that everyone is expected to contribute.

As the **Thinking Partner** it is your role to state the "rules of engagement" which include; how it will work, what will be expected of people, what you will do and how you will feedback the outcomes. The following is an example that you can use as a basis for your pre-meeting briefing.

I am delighted to invite you to share your thinking about xxxx at our next meeting which will be facilitated in the form of a Thinking Space. There will be no formal agenda. Instead, we will focus on behaving together in a way that allows our collective best thinking to surface.

The Thinking Space is typified by:

You going as far as you can with your own thinking

Everyone having a turn to think

Everyone else listening with attention and ease, no interrupting, no note-taking and initially no questions

I will act as a "thinking partner" to the group, helping you to get to your best thinking

I will use questions to get to deeper thinking and to challenge assumptions and their impact

I will facilitate the agreement of themes and the next steps

This is a real opportunity for us to learn from each other and really hear each other’s thinking and have conversations about possibilities and positive futures

Opening the Thinking Space Meeting

The following are some suggestions about how you can do this and a pattern of questions that in our experience works. Like anything new, you will need to be patient!

Before we begin, it can be helpful to confirm that my role is to help you to do your best thinking

Each person will have the opportunity to speak without being interrupted

We will pay attention to each contribution and value it as much as we value our own

It would be helpful for me if we can agree on how you will let me know that one wave of thinking is complete, ensuring I do not speak when you are still thinking

Only when I am sure that you are ready will I ask you another question

That may be the same question I have already asked, or it may not

Either way, my only desire is to help you to discover your best thinking

Once everyone has had an opportunity to share their thinking, we will open the space to an Appreciative conversation, reflecting on all of the thinking and what we would like to do next. We will maintain the rule of no interrupting

Everyone will have a chance to say or ask whatever they need/want to

Starting the Conversation

1. When you think about **xxx**, what would you like to think about and what are your thoughts?
2. What more do you think or feel or want to say?

Continuing the conversation based on what you think would work in the specific situation

The following is a series of questions that work. You do not need to use them all at the one meeting. In terms of Appreciative Inquiry and the 4D model, you will notice that the questions follow that pattern.

1. What themes are we noticing emerging? (Useful at the end of each thinking round)
2. What positive assumptions if any, are you holding that can help you/us to get to where you/we want to be?
3. What other assumptions if any, are you holding that are influencing your thinking?
4. If I was to invite you to be really ambitious about possibilities what would you like to think about and what are your thoughts?
5. What more do you think or feel or want to say?
6. What assumptions if any, are you holding and how are these assumptions influencing your thinking about possibilities for the future?
7. What would you like to do with these assumptions? (It is fine to hold them at this point, and explore them further)
8. If you are choosing to hold onto and keep visible xxx as an assumption how does that influence your thinking about possibilities for the future?
9. If you are choosing to let that assumption go, what usefully fills the space left behind? (How could you reframe these assumptions?)
10. What do you need to take a note of (including the assumptions) at this stage in your thinking space?
11. What specific detailed statement(s) of success do you want to agree on and record for today's thinking session? (Most helpfully relationships and results should be considered)
12. How is what you have decided influenced by any remaining assumptions (Both helpful and limiting)?
13. What can you commit to now? (To deliver between now and when we speak again)

THINKING SPACE: AN INTRODUCTION

Closing and Appreciation

1. My commitment to you based on what we agreed is...
2. Our next conversation will be on...
3. I would like to thank you for sharing your thinking with me and as a token of my appreciation, I would like to say...