

Personal Leadership



A Practical Introduction to Thinking Space and Thinking Environments

INTRODUCTION

Many of the spaces that are set up, convened, organised to be collective and collaborative are not done so in a way that encourages independent thinking. Indeed, thinking might not even be done at all. Meetings are the top killer of independent thinking and so too can coaching and mentoring be when done badly.

Think about the list below and mark all the statements that you experience in your organisation:

- Deadly boring or frustrating meetings.
- Brain numbing power point presentations.
- Talking shops; same things going around and around, same people making the same points, same people saying nothing.
- Fear, politics and hierarchy win out over challenge and honesty.
- Nobody challenges the boss.
- Everyone is talking over each other.
- You might be asked what you think, but you don't get the space to share your thinking before people either disagree or agree and interrupt with their thinking.

The Harvard Business Review recently surveyed 182 senior managers in a range of industries: **65%** said meetings keep them from completing their own work. **71%** said meetings are unproductive and inefficient. **64%** said meetings come at the expense of deep thinking. **62%** said meetings miss opportunities to bring the team closer together. Meetings reinforce what is above the horizon line on the iceberg model and facilitate talking about the same things over and over. They are fundamentally mechanisms of compliance and control and not of collaboration and change.

You can read the complete article here <https://hbr.org/2017/07/stop-the-meeting-madness> which provides some tips as to how you can reduce the number of meetings. However, there is still the challenge of the quality of the meetings when they do take place.

LIBERATING THINKING AND FEELING

One of the central beliefs that this work asks us to explore is how we create Thinking Environments as an antidote to awful meetings where you are genuinely encouraged to think for yourself and where there is innovation and creativity with no fear of failure. At the core of this thinking are simple ideas and processes that shift our routine and ingrained patterns of doing things. Small changes will impact big results and there will be sceptics. Once again, a reminder that to change the culture and to get below the surface you need to do different things. Doing what you have always done will not make the change.

At the heart of this approach is the creation of time and space to think and a belief that people can and will respond positively 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.

THINKING SPACE

People can think deeply for themselves and if a Thinking Space is created, that thinking can and will emerge. The Thinking Partner is the catalyst. In this space the quality of the questions and the quality of listening are paramount. Listening values the thinking and as a result the thinking improves. As the quality of thinking improves so does the quality of decision making and planned action. 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 with real actions and commitments towards transformation. At the heart of this is a belief that people can think for themselves and that if we ask powerful questions and listen without interruption then great thinking will emerge. 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 solved and individuals whose voice may not have been heard.

The Thinking Space process will:

- Surface connectedness based on listening, genuineness and not knowing.
- Assume that 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 related to the purpose of the organisation.

AS THE THINKER

Thinking for ourselves takes courage, the courage to reclaim independent thinking. What is at stake here is your own mind, your own thoughts, dreams and fears, being invited into a space without judgement, cynicism or doubt. This is unusual, so thinking aloud and going where your thinking takes you is a new feeling. You will need to be strong not to feel that it is indulgent and self-centred to do all this thinking without asking for the thoughts, approval or critique from others. It takes time, but you do know how to think for yourself.

THINKING PARTNER

As a Thinking Partner, your job is to hold the space and provide astonishing presence and attention into which the Thinker can bring their thinking. Your attention will free the mind of the person in front of you to think independently. There is no need to speak, to clarify the thinking of the other person or to interject with a story of your own. It is not about you! You will want to abandon your promise not to interrupt, to add your thinking into the mix and to understand more. That happens. Just notice it and move on. I have had numerous Thinking Spaces where I had no idea what the Thinker was talking about. That's weird but it's also fine. What I know is that I don't need to understand their thinking because the purpose of the whole process is that they do.

THINKING ENVIRONMENTS

The creation of a Thinking Environment is the contract that holds the Thinking Space together. The Thinking Environment has 10 components that overlap and complement each other.

ATTENTION

Listening without interrupting, intense curiosity about where the thinking will go next.

EQUALITY

We are thinking equals, we give each other equal time to think.

EASE

I am at ease with myself and with you.

APPRECIATION

Noticing what is good and saying it.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Creating a safe space for courageous thinking without fear of retribution.

INFORMATION

Supplying facts and recognising social context, dismantling denial.

DIFFERENCE

Championing our difference, our diversity of identity and thought.

INQUIRY

Using questions to free up more thinking.

PLACE

Creating the environment that values the thinking.

You will experience this as part of our work together and we will encourage you to change the way you hold space, in your relationships at work and at home.