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The Thinking Environment

Attention

The quality of your attention profoundly affects the quality of other people's thinking.

When someone is thinking around you, much of the quality of what you are hearing is your effect on them. In fact, the quality of your attention determines the quality of other people's thinking. Attention, generated by deep respect and genuine interest, and without interruption is the key to a Thinking Environment.

The next time someone asks for your help with a problem, remember that the best help you can be is to let form their own ideas, thoroughly, first.

Most of the time, that is all that is needed. Usually the best solution to a person's dilemma is incipient in their own mind. All you have to do is set up the conditions for them to find and develop it. The first condition for this calibre of thinking is Attention of the finest kind.

So, if good thinking is your aim, your riveted, generous attention will almost surely produce it.

Attention: Listening with palpable respect and genuine interest, and without interruption

Equality

Even in a hierarchy people can be equal as thinkers.
Knowing you will have your turn improves the equality of your attention.

In a Thinking Environment, even in a hierarchy, everyone is valued equally as a thinker. Everyone gets a turn to think out loud and a turn to give attention. To know you will get your turn to speak makes your attention more genuine and relaxed. It also makes your speaking more succinct.

Equality keeps the talkative people from silencing the quiet ones. But it also requires the quiet ones to value and contribute their own thinking. In a

Thinking Environment no one can abdicate responsibility for thinking. And the resulting high quality ideas and decisions mean that everyone benefits.

A Thinking Environment is also a structure of boundaries, allowing true freedom of thinking to occur. The Thinking Partnership Session®, Transforming Meetings®, and Thinking Mentoring™ are especially effective programmes for developing this kind of Equality.

Equality: Treating each other as thinking peers. Giving equal turns and attention; Keeping Boundaries and Agreements

Ease

Ease creates; urgency destroys.

Ease, an internal state free from rush or urgency, creates the best conditions for thinking.

But Ease is being systematically bred out of our lives. Ease is seen to be the enemy of the fast profit, the you-are-what-you-have-and-whom-you-control working world. The world seems, in fact, to select the urgency-addicted leaders to drive our organisations. Other models of leadership are 'sterilized out.'

However, if we want people to think well under impossible deadlines and inside the injunctions of 'faster, better, cheaper, more,' we must cultivate internal ease.

This takes the particular discipline of a Thinking Environment, and it takes a preference for quality over the rush of adrenaline.

Ease: Offering freedom from internal rush or urgency

Appreciation

Reality is not just the bad; it is also the good. The mind requires an awareness of both in order to work at its best.

Society teaches us that to see what is good is to be naïve, whereas to be critical is to be informed, grounded, sophisticated and grownup. And so, in discussions we are asked to focus first, and sometimes only, on the things that are not working, the failures, the crisis looming, the stupidities committed.

The consequence is that our thinking is usually based on an unbalanced and, therefore, incorrect picture.

A Thinking Environment, on the other hand, requires a balanced picture, inclusive of the positive truths about a situation, person or group. Thinking

Environment expertise develops the right ratio of appreciation to criticism so that individuals and groups can think at their best.

Appreciation: Practicing a 5:1 ratio of appreciation to criticism

Encouragement

To be 'better than' is not necessarily to be 'good.'

Competition between people ensures only one thing: if you win, you will have done a better job at whatever it is than the other person did. That does not mean, however, that you will have done a truly good job.

To compete does not ensure certain excellence. It merely ensures comparative success. And the problem with that is that it distracts us from discovering what good might actually be.

Competition between thinkers is especially dangerous. It keeps their attention on each other as rivals, not on the huge potential for each to think courageously for themselves.

A Thinking Environment prevents internal competition by using particular processes to set up a wholehearted, unthreatened, selfless search for good ideas.

Encouragement: Giving courage to go to the cutting edge of ideas by moving beyond internal competition.

Feelings

Fear constricts everything, especially thinking.

Crying can make you smarter.

After laughter thinking improves.

Thinking stops when we are upset. But if we express feelings just enough, thinking re-starts. Unfortunately, we have this backwards in our society. We think that when feelings start, thinking stops. And so when crying starts, for example, we stop it. When we do this, we interfere with exactly the process that helps a person to think clearly again.

So the next time a colleague or friend begins to show signs of feelings, relax and welcome them. Good thinking lies just around the corner.

Feelings: Allowing sufficient emotional release to restore thinking

Information

Withholding or denying information results in intellectual vandalism. Facing what you have been denying leads to better thinking.

That information is power is never more true than when you want people to think well. People are basing their decisions and actions on information and assumptions all of the time. When the information is incorrect and, therefore, the assumptions are specious, the quality of decisions and actions suffers.

The importance of information pertains most obviously to facts and data. But it also pertains to the pernicious phenomenon of denial, the assumption that what is happening is not happening. There are particular questions that can bring a person safely face to face with what is true so that they can think well about it. Learning how to formulate these questions is an advanced facet of Thinking Environment expertise.

Information: Supplying the facts; dismantling denial

Diversity

The greater the diversity of the group, and the greater the welcoming of diverse points of view, the greater the chance of accurate, cutting-edge thinking.

Reality is diverse. And to think well we need to be in as real, and therefore as diverse, a setting as possible.

We need to be surrounded by people from many identity groups, and we need to know that there will be no reprisal for thinking differently from the rest of the group.

The series of questions that best reveals and strengthens the diversity of a group is another important program producing Thinking Environment expertise.

Diversity: Welcoming divergent thinking and diverse group identities

Incisive Questions™

A wellspring of good ideas lies just beneath a limiting assumption. An Incisive Question will remove it, freeing the mind to think afresh.

Questions generate thinking better than commands or statements. But some questions are more generative than others. The most igniting kind of question we call an "Incisive Question." It is any question that removes limiting

assumptions from your thinking so that you can think clearly and dynamically again. An Incisive Question does this by replacing the untrue limiting assumption with a true liberating one.

This process at its best has been described as 'a tool of unbelievable precision and power'. (See our Programme on The Thinking Partnership.) Developing this expertise is invaluable, but even a general approach to finding and removing limiting assumptions can set thinking free.

Everything human beings do is driven by assumptions. We might as well become aware of them, remove the limiting ones, and, by asking Incisive Questions, live by the liberating ones.

Incisive Questions: Removing assumptions that limit our ability to think for ourselves clearly and creatively

Place

When the physical environment affirms our importance, we think more clearly and boldly. When our bodies are cared for and respected, our thinking improves.

Learning how to choose and set up a place for the best thinking of a group is another facet of developing Thinking Environment expertise.

We have found consistently that Thinking Environments are places that say back to people, 'You matter.'

People think better when they can arrive and notice that the place reflects their value - to the people there and to the event. It is a silent form of appreciation.

Place: Creating a physical environment that says back to people, 'You matter.'

Some incisive questions

What would you like to think about?

What more?

What is working?

What is not working?

What are you assuming that stands in the way of what you are trying to achieve/be?

Think about those assumptions