A study of whether, and how meetings held in a Thinking Environment® impact organisational life

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Précis of a Masters Research thesis, 2008

Contents

About this publication

This publication provides a précis of research I undertook in 2008 as part of an MSc in Coaching and Development with the University of Portsmouth.

In producing this précis, prominence has been given to the results of primary research performed for the study and the subsequent discussion of these results in the context within which the study was performed.

The nature of a précis means that I have had to omit in this publication some aspects of the results and discussion that were included in the full manuscript. My intention however has been to maintain its spirit and balance appropriately.

Please also note that The Thinking Environment is trademarked by Time to Think Ltd. This includes not only the Thinking Environment but also the Ten Components, Transforming Meetings and Incisive Questions. By way of abbreviation, the trade mark symbol has not been referenced in this document where these terms are used.

My thanks go to all those who contributed to this research project. This includes the Interviewees, my Thinking Partners and Study Buddies, all forty Thinking Environment Consultants worldwide, three very dear friends Sara, Jane and Elaine, and my family who listened, cajoled, proof-read and understood.

If you would like to read the full manuscript, please contact me.

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In her leading text on leadership, Margaret Wheatley[2] writes:

"There are many attempts to leave behind the view that predominated in the twentieth century when we believed that organisations could succeed by confining workers to narrow roles and asking only for very partial contributions. As we let go of the machine model of organisations and workers as replaceable cogs in the machinery of production, we begin to see ourselves in much richer dimensions to appreciate our wholeness and hopefully to design organisations that honour and make use of the great gift of who we humans are."

Introduction

The Thinking Environment is a set of conditions that purport to help people to think well for themselves. It was developed by Nancy Kline and her company Time to Think[1] and is the product of the discovery that in order for people to think clearly and independently, the people around them need to behave in certain ways. Nancy depicts ten ways that she claims are fairly dependable in this regard and these have become known as the Ten Components of a Thinking Environment.

The need to think well for ourselves in various aspects of our work and lives encouraged Time to Think to develop several applications of the Thinking Environment. One of these applications, called Transforming Meetings, creates a Thinking Environment in meetings. It works with a number of Principles and Behaviours to embody the Ten Components and so to generate people's best thinking in a meeting environment.

If we consider the application of the Thinking Environment in meetings to be a system of human behaviours, values and assumptions, it could comfortably be placed conceptually, into the field of organisation development interventions.

As second generation organisation development takes a hold, the Thinking Environment complements the growing interest in organisational culture, the learning organisation and team working. It might sit alongside principles and practices such as Systems Thinking, Team discipline and coaching, Dialogue, World Cafe Conversations or the Six Thinking Hats. That is not to say that any of these practices are similar, it is simply to say that they are all behavioural science principles and practices used in organisations to increase individual and organisational effectiveness.

The emergence of principles and practices such as these might be seen to coincide with the disillusionment of the mechanistic, organisational concepts originating in the seventeenth century but still alive in the twentieth century.

As organisations become increasingly aware of the need to unlock the unique potential within each individual worker to be successful in the new knowledge age, organisation development practitioners research, utilise, refine and teach methods that can achieve the release of human ingenuity. As Margaret Wheatley alludes to though, ultimately this involves not only a change in practices but also a change in 'view'; a change in the way people think and a shift in the organisational assumptions underlying those practices.

Objectives of this study

— To investigate which aspects of organisational life are impacted by meetings held in a Thinking Environment;

— To determine whether meetings held in a Thinking Environment strengthen the efficacy of organisations; and

— To examine the theoretical and evidential reasons for this impact.

Leading researchers[3] in this field however note that a focus on changing and enhancing how people think rather than what people do is really very different from conventional organisation development practice. Reviewing organisational development practice to date[4], they note that although new ideas may be required to solve problems and identify possibilities, helping groups or organisations create new models or theories is not a typical subsection in organisation development manuals. In much organisational development practice, consultants bring new ideas in the form of knowledge, tested by practice and research, into the client system so that the focus is more on implementing externally validated knowledge than on creating internally generated knowledge. The subsequent work of these researchers has led them to conclude though that engaging collective ideation appears to be central to transformational change.

There are very tangible and practical reasons for engaging high quality collective ideation in Western society too; the growing professional service industries mean that people and their ideas are the assets of organisations; cost pressures mean that the generation of internally created knowledge is the only sustainable option; and the overload of data, means no one person can assimilate and interpret it.

It is onto this stage that this study stepped. It set out to research the efficacy of the Thinking Environment in meetings in the context of it being presented as an approach that generates people's best thinking. I was introduced to the Thinking Environment a number of years ago and observed a noticeable difference in outcomes in situations where it was applied. I experienced the Thinking Environment as a deeply humane way of being together to do work, enjoying enormously the liberation and access to my own intelligence it afforded me. But I also noticed that it was not uncommon for the group to express sheer disbelief at how far an individual or group had gone in their thinking. I asked myself the question: was my experience of the Thinking Environment related to the match between the Thinking Environment principles and my own sense

of truth and reality or do these principles reach far beyond personal predilections to the breadth of humanity? Combining this line of questioning with the context of the continued evolution of organisations in the twenty-first century led me to three specific research objectives, shown opposite.

The meeting environment was chosen for this study because of the centrality of meetings to an organisation's culture, performance and development. Although not the only entry point, meetings provide a major vehicle for people to do work together in organisations and they often explicitly set the ethical and performance standards for carrying out work. Implicitly, the culture of the meeting will most likely carry over beyond the meeting as well, generating multiple, often tacit outcomes from the meeting for the organisation.

The efficacy of a different approach to running meetings is also likely to be of interest to those executives and officers whose organisations form part of the evidence that suggests that meetings engulf time and money to little effect. American companies are said to hold over fifteen million meetings a day with senior and middle managers spending an estimated 60-80% of their time in meetings[5]. Whilst the loss of time in unproductive meetings has been estimated at $37billion annually for the USA[6] the academic literature consistently draws conclusions of meeting ineffectiveness and dullness. It even makes the point that paradoxically the "dynamic of dullness" (the dull energy sapping tone to a typical meeting interaction) is often present even in meetings in organisations that have adopted "best practice" meeting procedures[7].

Methodology

This study took an interpretivist approach, to an inductively based study of the Thinking Environment. It explored the impact of Thinking Environment meetings on organisations, through the interpretations and meanings given to the experiences of participants in the study. The study used a cross-sectional, single group design by collecting data from fifteen semi-structured interviews, with people who had experienced Thinking Environment meetings. Participants represented eleven organisations spanning three continents. The interview data was analysed by way of thorough, methodical and repeated examination searching for common features and contrary cases.

These statistics are not new to the hundreds of professional coaches and consultants who continually focus their intellectual and emotional energy on enhancing the performance of groups and teams. Giving attention to the efficacy of the points at which people interact in groups, forms part of their domain too. So in this regard, this study aims to contribute to the eternal pursuit of businesses and development practitioners alike to make meetings more effective.

My hope also is that this first piece of academic research on Thinking Environment meetings will cultivate interest among readers to conduct further studies that may serve to enrich our theoretical and empirical understanding of the conditions that help people and groups to think well for themselves. Through this understanding, organisations might accelerate the development of principles and practices that better *make use of the great gift of who we humans are.*[2]

The Interviews

The interviews sought to provide the most interviewee-centred account of their thoughts and feelings of the impact of Thinking Environment meetings. To achieve this each question was asked in turn and the only follow up question that was asked to each question was *"What more do you think or feel or want to say?"* or a variation thereof. No closed questions were asked, no lines of interest raised by the interviewee were pursued by the interviewer and no questions or comments made by the interviewer interrupted the interviewee. In this way, the interview comprised only the thoughts and feelings of the interviewee with the minimum adulteration from the interviewer. This meant that significance could be given to the consistency or diversity of the interviewees' thoughts and feelings about the impact of Thinking Environment meetings.

The Questions

1. Could you briefly describe for me your experience of meetings in a Thinking Environment?
2. What does the concept "The Thinking Environment" mean to you in the context of meetings?
3. In relation to the meetings that have been run in a Thinking Environment of which you have been a part, what impact do you think the Thinking Environment has had on those meetings?
4. To what extent do you think there might be an impact beyond those meetings, on the work people do and their experience of the organisation?
5. What is your experience of the impact of running meetings in a Thinking Environment, on the work you do and your experience of the organisation, outside of those meetings?
6. What do you think has been the impact of running meetings in a Thinking Environment on the performance of the business?
7. What do you think are the downsides to meetings held in a Thinking Environment?
8. What more do you think or feel or want to say about the impact of meetings run in a Thinking Environment?

The Interviewees

1. Vice President, Major Pharmaceutical Research Organisation
2. Managing Director, Major Short-term Insurance Broking Company
3. Organisational Development Consultant, Consumer Goods
4. Regional Teenage Pregnancy Coordinator, Public Health
5. Head of Business Change, Financial Services
6. Chair, NHS Trust
7. UK Sales Director, Leading Medical Device Supplier
8. Provincial Director, Financial Services
9. Chair, Board of Trustees, Third Sector National Organisation
10. General Manager, Healthcare
11. Leadership Development Manager, Consumer Goods
12. HR Director, Energy
13. CEO, Training provider for Attorneys and Financial Planners
14. Primary School Head Teacher
15. Strategic People Resourcing Manager, Consumer Goods

Overview of the results

Taken as a whole, the examination of the interviews provided evidence to suggest that Thinking Environment meetings do create the behaviours and actions that it professes to. In addition it suggests that they do enhance the clarity and independence of thinking. These behaviours and enhanced thinking generate multiple outcomes for individuals and groups alike, arguably very beneficial, within the meeting and extending into organisational life. There are some hurdles to be overcome, but taking into consideration the sentiment of the interviewees, if managed well, they are hurdles that are worth getting over: *"I've seen enough meetings that weren't [held in a Thinking Environment] to realise: 'man, what a mess'"*. [INTERVIEWEE 13]

The Results

The interviews were examined methodically and repeatedly in search of themes, patterns, diversity of opinion and contrary cases. From this detailed examination three segments emerged:

— Behaviours Generated by Thinking Environment meetings;
— Outcomes Generated from Thinking Environment meetings; and
— Difficulties Associated with Thinking Environment meetings.

The following pages provide an overview of the most significant results in each of these segments. This is then followed by Discussion of these results in the context of this study set out in the Introduction.

Behaviours Generated by Thinking Environment Meetings

The behaviours the interviewees said that they observed in Thinking Environment meetings were consistent with the Principles, Behaviours and Guidelines of a Thinking Environment.

All the interviewees talked about Thinking Environment meetings in a positive and appreciative way. It is my estimation that ninety-five percent of the time that each interview took was taken up with stories and observations of positive behavioural change.

"There's absolutely no doubt in my mind that those meetings have produced I would say the best results of any meetings I've been in, it's been a total change. It's been a real eye opener for me, because I mean I've been running meetings for years and years and years and I've never experienced the feeling of success coming out of meetings that I've felt coming out of these meetings in a Thinking Environment." [INTERVIEWEE 2]

It was apparent that the Thinking Environment behaviours were considered significantly different from the behaviours that manifest in 'standard' business meetings. 95% of interviewees contrasted at least one characteristic of a Thinking Environment meeting with a standard business meeting. The most common characteristics of standard business meetings highlighted in this way were: not paying attention; the presence of a few dominating voices; no decisions actually being made; and inauthentic debate.

Principles and Behavours of Thinking Environment meetings

PRINCIPLE	BEHAVIOUR
Everyone matters	Give everyone a turn to speak. Go around the group systematically at the beginning of the meeting, on each agenda item, several times and at the end of the meeting.
An accurate view of reality includes what is going well	Begin and end the meeting with a positive assessment of the group's work.
Knowing you won't be interrupted allows you to truly think for yourself	Allow each person to finish their thought uninterrupted, even in fierce debate.
Exploring one's own ideas in depth can liberate the thinking of the group	Give people time to think for themselves in Thinking Pairs of short, equal, uninterrupted turns.
Unexamined assumptions can limit thinking	Occasionally ask: *"What might we be assuming that could be limiting our thinking on this issue?"* and *"If we were to assume something more liberating and credible, what new ideas would occur to us?"*

"In the old fashioned way of having meetings there were people interrupting. And a whole load of people spoke up and a whole load of people never said a word. Therefore you didn't get input from everybody around the meeting table. Sometimes the people with the best idea kept quiet because they were scared or felt that somebody would laugh at their idea: all these things are coming out and I think that very important decisions are now being made with information that previously wasn't available."
[INTERVIEWEE 2]

"We are quite an ego-driven culture: I mean we are a very successful organisation and part of that has been driven by putting views on the table really strongly. But what [Thinking Environment meetings have] done is allowed the less obvious personalities to flourish which has been a huge shift in the way that the business has operated. We are getting to hear more voices, which has been really useful."
[INTERVIEWEE 11]

Having experienced Thinking Environment meetings, two things happen: people feel frustrated attending meetings in the old style and they want their bosses and colleagues to learn to work in a Thinking Environment way. 60% of interviewees expressed this combined view.

20% of interviewees mentioned the possibility that some people find the experience of Thinking Environment meetings uncomfortable, counter-cultural or difficult to apply to begin with.

All the interviewees spoke about the positive action of giving everyone a turn to speak in a Thinking Environment meeting. This practice held particular significance in dismantling patterns of inequality and dominance in a meeting. Half the interviewees mentioned this happening explicitly.

The interviewees considered the opening and closing rounds to foster *"a positive, strengths based culture"* [INTERVIEWEE 14], to *"help deal with the tricky bits in the middle"* [INTERVIEWEE 4], and to *"say to individuals you are important"* [INTERVIEWEE 2].

Allowing each person to finish their thought was touched on by 80% of interviewees. From further examination of the transcripts what was evident was that the broader concept of really good listening was common to all the interviewees' experience of Thinking Environment meetings and 60% of the interviewees had experienced the generative capacities of listening. 30% of interviewees also referenced that learning not to interrupt and learning to listen well can be uncomfortable and difficult to begin with.

Thinking Pairs was a relatively infrequent practice in the experiences of the interviewees whilst Examining Assumptions was discussed by approximately half.

"The flip side of that is that I am now finding myself increasingly frustrated if I'm in a standard business meeting where there's a rabble of voices. Very often as a woman I'm usually in a ratio of 1 to 12 or 2 to 12 where I've got to really work quite hard to be heard. I find myself increasingly frustrated by the level of interruption and the amount of talking."
[INTERVIEWEE 10]

"I think in many ways the Thinking Environment is really quite uncomfortable for people. Strangely, it's not a British way of working: it's not an unusual set of principles or anything anybody would quibble with but in practice most people protect themselves in meetings."
[INTERVIEWEE 6]

Outcomes Generated by Thinking Environment Meetings

The table below depicts the collection of outcomes consistently described by the interviewees.

Table 1

Outcomes generated from meetings held in a Thinking Environment

	WITHIN THE MEETING	EXTENDING INTO ORGANISATIONAL LIFE
FOR THE INDIVIDUAL	Individuals experience increased self-confidence and self-esteem [6] These meetings create better quality thinking [12] People feel more equal [10] The performance of the chair/leader is enhanced (they realise that the answers don't need to come from them) [7]	People feel valued more [9] People are more engaged with and committed to the organisation [9] People enjoy coming to work more [9] People grow and develop as a result of being exposed to this work [15] People utilise the Thinking Environment in other parts of their lives [7]
FOR THE GROUP	There is greater participation in these meetings; they are more inclusive [14] The meetings generate better ideas, solutions and decisions [14] Resolution is achieved faster in Thinking Environment meetings [9] There is better structure and rigour to the meetings, including noticeably more preparation in advance of the meeting [8] The meetings engender group responsibility of the issues and solutions and a focus on the collective agenda rather than individual agendas [7] The meetings are more valuable/ productive/efficient/meaningful [6] The group tackles harder issues [5]	The ethos of the Thinking Environment naturally spreads into other interactions such as one-to-ones [9] True teams emerge [5] These meetings foster genuine respect and trust between people which generates more authentic and honest interactions [7] It influences the culture of an organisation [7] There is a positive impact on the performance of the organisation [9]

[Numbers] represent the number of interviewees that mentioned this outcome, unprompted, out of a total of 15 interviewees

"Where a project has been contentious or bogged down in political sentiment, by applying those rules of thinking and engaging and allowing people to speak and by asking an incisive question, I think it has allowed people to think differently… it's been able to cut through those barriers and therefore has facilitated once again better decision making" [INTERVIEWEE 5]

Starting in the bottom left quadrant of Table 1, the data presented a resounding sense that Thinking Environment meetings are thought to achieve considerably more, in less time, than other meetings. The top left hand quadrant shows that these meetings also seem to have a sizeable impact on individuals in meetings. Of particular significance is the outcome that meetings held in a Thinking Environment enhance the quality of thinking. This research didn't set out to substantiate this claim, but it seems that this phenomenon is indeed foremost in the experiences of many of those interviewed.

However, there is evidence to suggest that not only is the quality of thinking enhanced, but also Thinking Environment meetings allow people to change how they think. In this study, it was observed that interviewees referred to Thinking Environment meetings as encouraging people to be more open-minded, providing a safe environment in which people can change what they think and shifting individual and organisational assumptions. This may not constitute a clinical definition of changing how people think but it does suggest that people experience what they consider to be a change in their thinking.

The beneficial outcomes reaped within the meetings then seem to extend quite significantly into organisational life. Interviewee 7 reflected *"the benefits I've talked about in a meeting context, basically are mirrored organisationally"*. The top right-hand quadrant of Table 1 shows that at an individual level, it seems the high end of Maslow's hierarchy of needs can be achieved: people feel more valued, are more engaged and committed in their work and people enjoy coming to work more.

Also of significance was the common experience of integrating the learning into individual personal development. Every interviewee's experience included a story which reflected the significance to them personally of being exposed to the Thinking Environment work. They had not only learnt a new way of conducting meetings, but they relayed stories as to how it contributed to their growth as a leader, as a chairperson, as a listener, as a facilitator, as a team member. In addition, just under half the interviewees told stories of how the learning had affected their personal lives beyond the workplace, as a husband, wife, mother, father, community member and so on.

"One of my colleagues has a 20 year old son who she always described as a bit of a handful. She just simply listened more deeply to him, didn't interrupt and used the good principles on a one to one with her own son. He hadn't a clue, she didn't describe at all to him what she was doing, she just used the approach and at the end of that conversation he said to her: 'I don't know what you're doing Mum but keep doing it, it works'". [INTERVIEWEE 10]

And finally, the bottom right-hand quadrant indicates that what emerges in organisational life is people naturally extending the practices into other interactions and processes. So it spreads. The data suggests that as it spreads, teams and relationships strengthen, ultimately impacting the culture of an organisation; the culture it creates is one of *"creativity, individual worth, group worth, a sense of mission, a sense of ownership, a freedom to identify and tackle problems and a feeling of love for the mission of the organisation and the people in the organisation."* [INTERVIEWEE 13] There was only one dissenting voice in this regard who despite her self-confessed appreciation for the philosophy, did not think that in and of itself it was sufficient to "shift organisations dramatically." [INTERVIEWEE 11]

Table 2
Summary of responses to the 'performance' question
"What do you think has been the impact of running meetings in a Thinking Environment on the performance of the business?"

CATEGORY	SUMMARY OF VIEW	INTERVIEWEES
A1	Significant positive impact with explicit reference to both behaviour changes and results achieved	4
A2	Significant positive impact on the success of the organisation(but no reference to specific results it has produced)	2
A3	The link made between people feeling valued/empowered, and higher productivity and performance	3
B1	Yes, a beneficial impact on behaviours of those that have been involved and culture (e.g. morale, engagement, listening, inclusivity, leadership qualities), too early to tell regards a correlation with performance of the business, potential recognised	3
B2	Too early to tell, confident there will be a positive impact, but equally sure that it won't be measurable in terms of business metrics	1
B3	It produces better leaders	1

Note: one invterviewee (the first interview to be conducted) was not asked this question

This quadrant also highlights that the data found a significant impact on performance. All but one interviewee was asked specifically what they thought in this regard and Table 2 summarises the responses from this question.

The table distinguishes between those interviewees that stated that Thinking Environment meetings impacted organisational performance positively (category A) and those interviewees who were not conclusive in this regard (category B). Organisational performance was defined by the interviewee in accordance with the measures used by their organisation.

In total, 65% thought that the Thinking Environment has a positive impact on the performance of their organisation. A further 30% said it had the potential to have a positive impact on the business, whilst the remaining interviewee answered the question in terms of the creation of better leaders. These answers combine to produce a significant finding that 95% of interviewees indicated that Thinking Environment meetings had or were expected to have a positive impact on the performance of the business.

"I can positively say that our business has improved by at least 20% and that's measurable in terms of Rand and Cents. You can take any kind of measurement whether you look at it from a service point of view or a sales perspective and everything is done about 20% better." [INTERVIEWEE 8]

The interviewees' views on performance were also correlated to the length of their exposure to Thinking Environment meetings and their relative position in their organisation. This correlation suggested that where an interviewee held a position of substantial hierarchical authority relative to the whole organisation to which they were referencing performance, the impact on performance was stated categorically as positive (Category A1 and A2). Where the interviewee did not hold this ultimate position of authority, the interviewee was less categorical about the impact on performance (Category A3 and B). No discernible pattern was identified in relation to the length of exposure.

This might reflect a positive disposition by those in positions of authority towards those initiatives they have invested emotionally and financially in or it might allude to a dependent relationship: tangible performance improvements are most forthcoming when Thinking Environment meetings are embraced by those in authority, perhaps because they are more likely to be consistently and widely adopted.

"The process enables far richer decisions to be made. So and in a literal sense, I do think you think better, because you're not under pressure to say what you need to say as quickly as possible so you get heard. So the concept of having rounds and giving people time to talk, allows people to listen more and I think then people think better, particularly with multiple perspectives."
[INTERVIEWEE 15]

"To me it's, gee how can I put it, for a start it's a calming effect… it's the opportunity to have quiet, to allow yourself to think… by the very nature of the way the meeting is run, individuals become calmer people. You're no longer jockeying for the time to say your piece in a meeting because you're scared someone's going to beat you or they're not going to listen to you. You wait your turn, you know you're going to be heard, you know nobody's going to be interrupting you."
[INTERVIEWEE 2]

One final observation about the outcomes generated from Thinking Environment meetings: on average, interviewees touched on between three and four meeting Principles during the course of their interview, with the Principles *"giving everyone a turn to speak"* and *"allowing each person to finish their thought"* being the most common. However, the way in which the interviewees described their experiences meant that it was not possible to establish any attestable relationships between the outcomes and any one given behaviour. Indeed, in light of the number of comments where outcomes were associated with generally 'the way in which the meeting is run,' the more convincing hypothesis is that the multiple outcomes are generated from the synergistic effects of the meeting Principles and Behaviours.

Difficulties Associated with the Thinking Environment

The association of positive outcomes with Thinking Environment meetings expressed by the interviewees overwhelmingly, prompted me to ask interviewees if there were any downsides in the interview and directed my attention towards a thorough examination of all contrary cases when analyzing the data. However, it is a matter of fact that 45% of interviewees did not think there were any downsides to Thinking Environment meetings.

The main downside themes that arose were largely associated with potential problems in the application rather than with negative outcomes. These can be summarised as a need for training, a need to manage resistance and consideration for sustainability.

Most notably, 55% of the interviews advocated expert training before running meetings in a Thinking Environment. This was linked to the definitive need for skill, flair and subtlety in chairing Thinking Environment meetings in order to prevent misunderstandings around its purpose and erroneous or rigid application.

25% of interviewees gave examples whereby a lack of preparation or ineptness by the chair had meant that a true Thinking Environment had not been generated and hence the results were not attained.

Also of relative significance were the warnings from 33% of interviewees that Thinking Environment meetings do meet resistance from cynics, skeptics or worse, those who actively try to disrupt it.

33% of interviewees also considered the sustainability of Thinking Environment practices, suggesting that even though the results from these practices speak for themselves, they are not immune to the individual and organisational forces which resist change. In expressing this sentiment they emphasised the need for consistency, practice and leading by example if it is to take hold.

"But I can also tell you it showed us something else… About 10% of your staff or your management team cannot function in [Thinking Environment meetings] because they've been used to old ways of doing things and they had to be replaced. If you want better results use a Thinking Environment, but you need to understand that it doesn't suit everybody. Some people are going to fall out here."
[INTERVIEWEE 8]

"I think the downside is when I've seen it half used, then actually it can be even more frustrating than not used at all… there's a lot of burden on the chair to maintain the integrity of the Thinking Environment."
[INTERVIEWEE 1]

Discussion

This study set out to consider three research objectives. These were:

— Which aspects of organisational life are impacted by Thinking Environment meetings?
— Do Thinking Environment meetings strengthen the efficacy of an organisation?
— What are the theoretical and evidential reasons for this impact?

This section draws together possible answers.

Which aspects of organisational life are impacted by Thinking Environment meetings?

The primary research found that Thinking Environment meetings provide a positive and appreciative environment, in which people listen generatively to their colleagues, equality is fostered, feelings can be expressed productively, there is a sense of ease, and underlying assumptions are uncovered and examined.

Aspects of organisational life that were found to be profoundly affected might be summarised as the effectiveness of meetings, the quality of ideas, solutions and decisions, the equality or otherwise of relationships, the clarity and independence of thinking in an organisation, individual motivation and development, the relationship between an individual and the organisation, the quality of conversations, the organisational culture and organisational performance.

It is also evident that Thinking Environment meetings can create tensions in organisational life. Some people find it uncomfortable or difficult to abide by the Principles and Behaviours and the Thinking Environment can for a few dismantle (possibly longstanding) patterns of inequality.

The consistency with which outcomes were discussed by the interviewees was striking, especially given the diversity of organisations and countries the interviewees represented. A thorough examination of contrary cases did not challenge significantly the consistency with which these aspects were referred to.

Do Thinking Environment meetings strengthen the efficacy of an organisation?

The performance of an organisation

Perhaps the most obvious measure of the efficacy of an organisation is its performance. Here the primary research found that Thinking Environment meetings have, or are expected to have, a positive impact on organisational performance in 95% of cases. Performance was defined by the interviewee in accordance with the measures used by their organisation.

The productivity of time spent in meetings

The primary data also suggested that Thinking Environment meetings are generative and productive, adding value to the organisation and to its people. The interviewees contrasted this with standard business meetings. If the current statistics relating to the opportunity cost of meetings cited in the Introduction are even vaguely accurate, then this turnaround in and of itself could strengthen the efficacy of organisations.

Collective ideation

Earlier in this précis, I mentioned that researchers have argued that the ability to create internally generated knowledge by engaging collective ideation is central to the efficacy of organisations. The primary research

"If you truly believe that in a normal setting the human brain is grossly underutilised, you would want to try meetings in a Thinking Environment because the process, the model, the philosophy opens up the human brain to doing what it uniquely can do which is tackle problems and find good answers. It's the best model I've found for harnessing the power of a number of brains all at the same time, compared to brainstorming and other things that people try to get group think going, the Thinking Environment... is just such an amazing force. I've come to believe that there is no problem that can't be tackled, with this kind of meeting, whereas I have seen problems that are beyond the capability of a group to wrestle with outside the Thinking Environment. So Thinking Environment meetings give me confidence that I can transform an organisation; I can create better outcomes and results whatever the mission of the organisation."

[INTERVIEWEE 13]

offers evidence to say that Thinking Environment meetings are effective at doing just this. 95% of interviewees shared a story or made a statement to the effect that better ideas, solutions and decisions are made in Thinking Environment meetings and the way in which they expressed these stories and statements reflected often sheer disbelief at the enhanced quality of ideas generated. Equally, 80% of interviewees were conclusive that these meetings enhance the quality of thinking.

Team development

The efficacy of an organisation may also be strengthened through the development of its teams. The presentation of the data contrasted dysfunctional meetings of old, where one or two dominant voices attended to personal agendas with value-add, relationship enhancing meetings of new where everyone contributes, there is group responsibility for the agenda items and people are valued and appreciated. These distinctions might be associated with the difference between the Assertion and Cooperation stages in John Whitmore's team development model[8] or perhaps the difference between Storming and Performing in Tuckman's model[9]. High performance team and team coaching literature often focus on interventions that move teams through the stages of team development. The experiences of the interviewees would suggest that Thinking Environment meetings contribute significantly to this movement.

Indeed, the discipline, consistency and openness of Thinking Environment meetings might help new teams and new team members to integrate more quickly, considerably. The significance of the interviewees experience of their thinking being enhanced in these meetings might also suggest that the concept of thinking well deserves much greater attention in the discipline associated with the development of teams, researchers and practitioners alike.

Team performance

Katzenbach and Smith[10], possibly the forefathers of the team performance literature highlighted that what sets high performance teams apart *"is the degree of commitment, particularly how committed the members are to one another. Such commitments go well beyond civility and teamwork. Each genuinely helps the others to achieve personal and professional goals."* Although, perhaps not expressed precisely in this way, the findings presented from this research suggested that Thinking Environment meetings do generate personal engagement and commitment and nurture respectful relationships. In this way it

might be concluded that Thinking Environment meetings are conducive to the development of high performance teams as they foster the critical component of commitment.

> *"We can say in our strategy document that we embrace multiple perspectives, diverse views and minorities in the workplace. But if people don't experience it in the most typical places of their work like, in a meeting then, the strategy is as good as the paper it's written on. So I certainly think [Thinking Environment] meetings start anchoring the intent of our strategy document; it resonates very nicely with it."*
> [INTERVIEWEE 15]

Extant research[11] has also shown that diverse teams outperform homogeneous teams, but diverse teams that are not well managed will be outperformed by homogenous teams that are well managed. The findings presented here suggested that Thinking Environment meetings are capable of maximizing diversity in a well managed way: most importantly interviewees reported the creation of equality of voice, the minority voice being heard and people engaging respectfully.

Peter Hawkins and Nick Smith, from the Bath Consulting Group, emphasise that an effective team meeting does not equate to an effective team[12]. The evidence presented here which suggested that learnings and practices from Thinking Environment meetings extend beyond the meetings into organisational life and personal lives is a significant finding in this regard. It seems to suggest that Thinking Environment meetings do not suffer from this potential shortcoming.

Organisational culture

The primary research also indicated that Thinking Environment meetings impact organisational culture. There was consistency with which the behaviours and outcomes were described by interviewees across eleven organisations and three continents suggesting dependability of the culture that Thinking Environment meetings produce. The question then is whether this culture is able to pervade the organisation.

Whilst the philosophy of these meetings clearly extends into organisational life, there was evidence that persistence and effort are required to sustain the practices in light of endemic organisational resistance to change.

It was also noted that the pervasiveness of Thinking Environment meetings

may be related to the extent to which those in positions of authority embrace the practices. It might therefore be concluded that Thinking Environment meetings do have the ability to strengthen the culture of an organisation if there is sufficient commitment and support to it. This would not be unlike any other change initiative.

A word of warning

I don't think it is possible from the evidence presented in this study to argue that Thinking Environment meetings do not strengthen the efficacy of an organisation. There is evidence however which suggests that: some people don't like it and will actively resist it; and sometimes a true Thinking Environment is not created and the results are worse than a standard business meeting. It could therefore be argued that it won't strengthen the efficacy of the organisation if the resistance is so great or the skill with which it is executed too little, that it cannot take a hold. Essentially, it can't act without people embracing it.

What are the theoretical and evidential reasons for the impact?

It appears to be evident that Thinking Environment meetings create an impact on individuals, teams and organisations. A number of suggestions are offered as to the reasons for this impact.

Firstly, it could be that the connections with the characteristics of high performance teams are at the heart of the successful outcomes that Thinking Environment meetings produce. Katzenbach and Smith isolated the critical factor defining a high performance team as being personal commitment to each other. So it is possible that the reason that Thinking Environment meetings have a positive impact on organisational life is their ability to generate this one elusive factor.

Secondly, it is postulated that the clarity of application that is provided in respect to holding Thinking Environment meetings is perhaps, surprisingly, a significant factor contributing to its success. In stark contrast with other models[13] the findings presented here implied consistent application of similar behaviours across organisations and continents and this suggests

> *"For the line guys out in the regions… by applying the Thinking Environment in district team meetings and regional team meetings, it's made it practical for them, they can really experience what it means to engage properly."*
> [INTERVIEWEE 3]

absolute clarity of intent and communication with regards to the philosophy. It is recognised that credit is also due in this regard to the teaching and expertise provided by the Thinking Environment Consultants. The Thinking Environment approach may not necessarily be comfortable at first, but it does seem to resonate with people and has already been translated into what people actually need to do to generate people's best thinking (the Principles and Behaviours, underpinned by the Ten Components).

Thirdly, Thinking Environment meetings might have such a far-reaching impact because they have the capacity to change and enhance how people think and to generate collective ideation, so needed in organisations in the twenty-first century. This capacity stems from the creation of the conditions that generate people's best thinking and *"utilises the potential of the human brain."* [INTERVIEWEE 13]

Fourthly, could it be that generative listening of the kind that Carl Rogers advocated over fifty years ago is so powerful that by generating better thinking it creates this shift in organisational culture and performance? The history and use of generative listening is discussed in more detail in the full manuscript. It is a key component of the Thinking Environment and the finding that 60% of interviewees reflected on the enhanced quality of attention in Thinking Environment meetings and the impact this had on their thinking, is significant

in this regard. This is contrasted to the extant management research where the focus of attention is on listening for the purpose of responding.[14]

Fifthly, it is hypothesised that the impact is as far-reaching as it is because it attends to humanity. In this environment people feel valued, people feel equal, it is a respectful way to engage and people's views are received in an affirming way. This surely plays to the heart of what it means to be human and to be humane; to be respected is preferred to being disrespected and to be honoured is preferred to being ignored. By attending to the higher state of individual worth, Thinking Environment meetings seem to re-awaken organisations to the *"great gift of who we humans are."*[2]

And finally, it is hypothesised that Thinking Environment meetings are so impactful because of the synergies generated from the Principles and Behaviours working together. The literature review (included in the full manuscript) highlighted the potential for each of these Principles and Behaviours when they are operating independently. This potential was not insignificant and so it might not be surprising to find that when combined, the outcomes produced are as compelling as described by the interviewees in this research: the interview content and sentiment would certainly support a view that it is the way in which the Principles combine that produces the generative and multiple outcomes from Thinking Environment meetings.

Why do Thinking Environment meetings generate multiple outcomes for individuals, teams and organisations?

1. They generate Commitment;
2. There is practicality and immediate applicability in the way this approach to meetings is taught;
3. Thinking Environment meetings have the capacity to create internally generated knowledge through collective ideation;
4. They engender Generative Attention: a component proven by Carl Rogers to aid mutually effective communication that is pointed towards solving a problem;
5. Thinking Environment meetings are a deeply respectful and humane way of doing business; and
6. They skilfully integrate a number of well-supported principles and behaviours.

"Well the underlying principle [of the Thinking Environment] is an authentic respect for other human beings and the brain power of other human beings… Some people sort of get the essence of it just almost naturally. For those of us who don't, the Ten Components help us to see "OK, here's how to do it", it's a sort of abide by numbers way of looking at it. So the Ten Components reflect how you actually implement this authentic respect and caring for the person and for the mental capability of the other person in the room."
[INTERVIEWEE 13]

"It's more than a process clearly, it's a whole philosophical framework that works well and brings out the potential of individuals and groups. I think that's part of its secret in that it works well for individuals and groups. It makes individuals more effective and it makes groups more effective. And it also adds to people's life experience whether that's their life experience within an organisation or whether it's working in their day to day life outside of that situation. I think it has an impact on both. It brings things to individuals, it brings things to organisations but it also adds to life, so it's a very empowering process."
[INTERVIEWEE 9]

Conclusion

This study appreciated the far-reaching effects of Thinking Environment meetings and acknowledged the difficulties associated with creating Thinking Environments in meetings. It contextualised this approach to meetings within the shifting patterns of twenty-first century organisations and the need for different interventions that can create internal knowledge and collective ideation. It offers researchers and practitioners evidence to suggest that Thinking Environment meetings create dramatically more effective meetings in terms of behaviours and outcomes. It indicated that Thinking Environment meetings produce an overwhelmingly positive and generative effect on organisations, facilitating growth and success in a way that nurtures the spirit of humanity. It might even be concluded that the majority of people like it and find it a tremendously rewarding way of being together. However, it needs to be expected and managed, that some will not like it and may try to disrupt it.

This research has opened the discussion as to why Thinking Environment meetings have this impact and by drawing on team literature, psychotherapy and organisation development thought leadership, it has highlighted that the philosophy of Thinking Environment meetings plays into a number of ideas that are coming to the fore: *deep* listening, the release of human ingenuity, collective ideation and internally generated knowledge. It also attends to the important notion of 'commitment', highlighted over a decade ago by Katzenbach and Smith[10]. It is advocated that it is precisely because Thinking Environment meetings attend to all these contemporary theories so successfully, that they produce *"the best results of any meetings"* [INTERVIEWEE 2] which are *"mirrored organisationally."* [INTERVIEWEE 7] It is also noticeable that these contemporary theories support the pre-eminence of people being skilful in service of creating the right environment for others; not the pre-eminence of people being skilful themselves, in isolation.

It is acknowledged that this study may not have provided any new knowledge about the behaviours and outcomes of Thinking Environment meetings, to the forty or so Thinking Environment Consultants who teach and practice this work for a living. They probably observe with their own eyes on a daily basis what has been described and discussed here. It is also recognised that this study corroborates the findings detailed in the personal examples, stories and case studies presented by Nancy Kline herself[1]. If it hasn't provided new knowledge to these professionals at the forefront of this work, what it hopes to have done is contribute to a greater understanding

and wisdom about that which we do know. Further research might assess the efficacy of Thinking Environment meetings by comparison with other organisational interventions or test the hypothesis that the meeting Principles and Behaviours combine equally to produce the outcomes.

From a personal perspective, having heard the experiences of fifteen senior officers in different organisations and on different continents, it has confirmed to me that the philosophy of the Thinking Environment stretches far beyond personal predilections. It is certainly an effective way of doing business in the twenty-first century, combining rigour and discipline with humanity.

Notes

[1] As detailed in Kline, N. (1999) "Time to Think: Listening to ignite the human mind", London: Wardlock.

[2] Wheatley, M. J. (1999), *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering order in a chaotic world*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. (p14)

[3] Bushe, G. R. and Kassam, A. F. (2005), "When is Appreciative Inquiry Transformational? A Meta-Case Analysis", *The Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, Vol. 41 No. 2, June, pp161-181

[4] In particular, French, W.L. and Bell, C.H. (1999), *Organisation Development: Behaviour Science Interventions for Organisation Improvement*, 6th edn. New Jersey: Prentice Hall and Cummings, T. G. and Worley, C. G. (2001), Organisation development and change, Cincinnati, OH: South-Western

[5] *Economist* (2003), "Think before you meet", Vol. 369 Issue 8347 Special section p17.

[6] Elsayed-Elkhouly, S.M., Lazarus, H. and Forsythe, V. (1997), "Why is a third of your time wasted in meetings", *Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 16 No. 9, pp672-676.

[7] Ringer, M. (2007), "Leadership for collective thinking in the workplace", *Team Performance Management*, Vol. 13, No. 3/4, pp130-144.

[8] Whitmore, J. (2002), Coaching for Performance: *GROWing People Performance and Purpose*, 3rd edn. Nicholas Brealey Publishing

[9] Tuckman, B.W. (1965), "Developmental sequence in small groups", *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 63, No. 6, pp384-99.

[10] Katzenbach, J.R. and Smith, D.K. (1993), *The Wisdom of Teams*, Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company (p65)

[11] Lattimer, B. (1995), Study conducted within General Electric, Towers Perrin, Atlanta, Georgia

[12] Hawkins, P. and Smith, N. (2006), *Coaching, Mentoring and Organisational Consultancy: Supervision and Development*, New York: McGraw-Hill

[13] for instance Courtney, H.S., Navarro, E. and O'Hare, C.A. (2007), "The Dynamic Organic Transformational team model for high-performance knowledge-worker teams", *Team Performance Management*, Vol. 13, No. 1/2, pp34-46

[14] Covey, S. (1989), *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful lessons in personal change*, London: Simon and Schuster UK Ltd.; Maister, D.H., Green, C.H. and Galford, R.M. (2000), *The Trusted Advisor*, New York: The Free Press; and Peters, T. (1989), *Thriving on Chaos: Handbook for a Management Revolution*, London: Pan Books Ltd.