DO WHAT WORKS

BY

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One Definition of insanity is the decision to keep doing something that is not working, to do it in the same way, and to expect different results. One definition of sanity, then, is to notice what is not working, change the way you are doing it and get different results. One definition of sanity is to <u>do what works</u>.

As slightly flippant as these definitions are, I think they are interesting to consider in the context of the success of the Thinking Environment.

Establishing the Ten Components of a Thinking Environment is an act of sanity. It works. When in place correctly as a system these ten behaviours produce better thinking by everyone, leading to better results in less time at less cost (in fact often with huge cost savings), increase inclusiveness and engagement and thus increase productivity without increasing the workforce. That correlation of productivity with engagement and engagement with the Thinking Environment accounts for the increasing demand for this expertise and for the sometimes passionate enthusiasm people can feel when it becomes the way they conduct business and their lives.

So in a nutshell, when you put into place all Ten Components, almost everything gets better. When you don't, things plod along, or -- get worse. It works. It dignifies. It engages. It is a mark of sanity. So why would you ever decide not to do it?

Some people decide just that. Now and then people, experiencing the process, say no. And sometimes it is not "No, thank you." It is sometimes a contemptuous, "absolutely not."

My favourite extreme response like this occurred at a corporate Christmas party. I walked into the room where several of the team I had trained a year before were gathered for drinks. The first eight people I greeted said "hello" warmly, but when it was Howard's turn, he said to me, "Oh, yes, Nancy Kline. Hello. It is nice to see you in conditions under which I am not being tortured." (That moment certainly challenged my social skills.)

This reaction fascinates me. Torture? Discomfort, okay; but torture? If the process works so well, what is it about it that generates agony in a few people?

We are researching this systematically at the moment. But early indications are that the "torture" is a kind of withdrawal, physically even, from addiction to three things simultaneously:

1.   Control
2.   Urgency
3.   Certainty

This hearty but dangerous triumvirate drives the attitudes and behaviour of some people so vigorously they cannot bear to be without it. They define their effectiveness and power almost entirely in its terms. And as with any addiction, to be denied the "substance" can lead the person to an immediate and sometimes self-destructive retrieval of it.

Control, urgency, and certainty. Highly addictive. Highly ineffective. The behaviours that keep these states in place are exactly the behaviours that stifle independent, rigorous, creative thinking. They do not work. But they can become exactly the way some people do things over and over again and wonder each time why their poor results do not change.

The Thinking Environment replaces control, urgency, and certainty with:
1. Respect
2. Ease
3. Preference for responsible risk

When you are in a Thinking Environment, you get to explore the cutting edge of your thinking. You get to figure out what you really do think, and to say it. You get to ask the unspoken questions and help come up with often brilliant answers. You get to notice that your thinking and contribution really do matter.

And the reason you can do all of this in a group that might before have been a bear pit of dominance by a few, silence among others, and exhausting, disappointing discussion all around, is that everyone is treating you with respect, ease, and a preference for responsible risk, not with control, urgency, or certainty.

For example, they are giving you a turn often, a turn in which you <u>know</u> you will not be interrupted and during which you are expected to think for <u>yourself</u>. They are listening with genuine, undistracted interest; they are five times more acknowledging of your strengths and talents than they are critical of your shortcomings. They are at ease inside; they are eager to collaborate with you, rather than to compete with and crush you. Can you think better and better under those conditions? And do you become more and more committed to and engaged in the work of the group? You bet.

But Howard, conceivably a control/urgency/certainty addict, becomes more and more desperate when required to provide these conditions for you. During your turn he is waiting, not listening. He wants one thing: his turn. He is assuming that his ideas and experience and analysis are inherently better than anything you could come up with during this period of uninterrupted attention he has to give you; he assumes that time is saved by rushing you; he assumes that hacking up an idea before it is well-formed will somehow improve it. He writhes in the sweat of his own adrenalin, no longer allowed to expel it by charging head down, horns protruding, into your sentence.

He assumes that if he listens too long, he will hear things he does not know how to handle and that he will look stupid in the face of his uncertainty. He assumes that if everyone can speak and think for themselves, he will lose power, influence, and control over the outcome, and that that is bad. He assumes that there is only so much success to go around, and that if others shine, he cannot.

Addictive behaviour of any kind is held in place with denial. And this tripod of control, urgency, and certainty is no exception. Denial is essentially the assumption that something is not happening that is (or conversely, that something is happening that is not). People craving control, urgency, and certainty deny that new levels of clarity, rigour, imagination and practicality in people's thinking are emerging proportionate to the presence of each of the Ten Components. They cannot see what is right in front of them. They mistake rigorous, respectful debate for lack of spontaneity. They confuse listening with waiting to speak. They find only boredom where others find deep engagement and sometimes fascination.

Ironically, the Thinking Environment is not only a place free of control, urgency, and certainty. It also is a place where those obsessions can dissipate, even heal. It is in a Thinking Environment, particularly when treated to the respect and ease of uninterrupted attention, a person can dare to see and acknowledge the life-long limiting assumptions, untrue but unconsidered, that are fuelling their behaviour. They can ask themselves: What am I assuming that makes me need control, urgency, and certainty? Are these assumptions, objectively, true? If I were to assume something more true and liberating, how would I show respect, cultivate ease, and act with a preference for responsible risk?

Most of today's advanced leadership skills rely on the Ten Components of a Thinking Environment to be achieved. They work. They produce both business results and human flourishing. They are the epitome of sanity. So the leader who finds them torture may want to turn from their battle helm and look soberly at the detritus washing up on their shores.

In fact, Howard, if you knew that your best business allies are respect, ease, and a preference for responsible risk, how would you run your next meeting, and what would change for you while you listen? And, yes, what impressive business outcomes might result?