TOOLS OF THE TRADE

In a regular series, **Carol Wilson** identifies the tools and models frequently used during coaching projects. This month, she looks at Nancy Kline's Thinking Environment

The origins of the Thinking Environment spring from one observation and one question. *"The quality of everything we do depends on the quality of the thinking we do first"* is a statement that has powerful implications. The consequent question is: *"What does it take for people to help each other to think well for themselves?"*

Nancy Kline was asking this question more than two decades ago, after she had founded a school in her native USA. When she put the question to people, she noticed that the answer tended not to be about IQ, education, or experience; it turned out that the single most important factor in the quality of people's thinking was the way they were being treated by those around them.

She went on to identify ten ways that were most dependable in this regard, and these became known as the Ten Components of a Thinking Environment (listed in the table below).

A Thinking Environment can be created between two people – a Thinking Partnership, comprising Thinker (coachee) and Partner (coach) – or in a group, at a think tank or any other type of meeting.

To me, the most important factor of the Thinking Environment is the quality of attention in the listening. The type of listening that Kline prescribes is not inactive; she describes it as attention bestowed on the Thinker by the Partner and that, for an effective session, this attention needs to be an equal balance of three streams:

"In the first stream the Partner's attention is on the content of what the Thinker is saying.

"In the second stream their attention is on their response to what the Thinker is saying.

"In the third stream their attention is on the creation of a Thinking Environment for the Thinker."

Her theories are supported by practical structures that, if adhered to, will enable the Thinker to work through the issues, gain some clarity and find a way forward.

The Thinking Session starts with a simple question: "What would you like to think about and what are your thoughts?"

The Thinker is then able to talk through his situation at will. The key here lies in two elements: the quality of attention given by the Partner and the knowledge from the Thinker that he will not be interrupted; therefore the 'contracting' that takes place prior to the conversation is important, so that the Thinker knows he is going to be given sufficient time to speak and be listened to.

Eventually, the Thinker often reaches a point where everything that initially has come into his thoughts has been said. He will pause and the Partner can ask: "What more do you think, or feel or want to say?"

The phrase 'what more' can sound unnatural when spoken in some situations. However, to ask 'what else?' may lead the Thinker into another subject, while 'what else about that?' may limit him to the same one. As I

1. ATTENTION	Listening with palpable respect and without interruption
2. EQUALITY	Treating each other as thinking peers; Giving equal turns and attention; Keeping agreements and boundaries
3. EASE	Offering freedom from internal rush or urgency
4. APPRECIATION	Offering genuine acknowledgement of a person's qualities; Practicing a 5:1 ratio of appreciation to criticism
5. ENCOURAGEMENT	Giving courage to go to the cutting edge of ideas by moving beyond internal competition
6. FEELINGS	Allowing sufficient emotional release to restore thinking
7. INFORMATION	Supplying the facts; Dismantling denial
8. DIVERSITY	Welcoming divergent thinking and diverse group identities
9. INCISIVE QUESTIONSTM	Removing assumptions that limit our ability to think for ourselves clearly and creatively
10. PLACE	Creating a physical environment that says back to people, "You matter"

have said before in this series, the technique must be the tool and not the master, and I have heard Kline offering similar advice herself.

This is a process that has been tried and tested over many years, so it is worthwhile adhering to the exact words where possible; however, the comfort of the Thinker and the rapport within the Partnership are key elements in helping the Thinker think more clearly, so the words could be changed if necessary to ensure these conditions are met.

When asked to think some more, the Thinker may be surprised at how many different thoughts appear and, because he is in the Thinking Environment, he has the leisure to express and explore them. It is a fact that we often find out what we think by talking out loud, and this is one of the core benefits of this process.
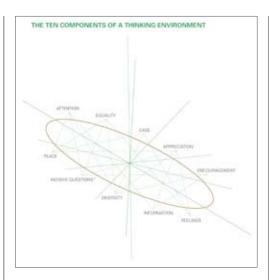
'What more?' questions can be asked several times until everything is out on the table and the Thinker is ready to identify what is standing in the way of his goals.

This is where the Partner makes a more active intervention by asking what Kline terms 'Incisive Questions'™. The process for this is to:

- Identify what might be a limiting assumption, eg 'No-one listens to me around here'
- Ask an Incisive Question to remove that belief, eg 'If you knew you would be listened to, what would you say and to whom?'

Some similar questions might be:
- 'What assumption are you making that is getting in the way?'
- 'If you knew you were to become the boss, what problem would you solve first and how?'
- 'If you knew you were vital to this organisation's success, how would you approach your work?'
- 'If things could be exactly right for you, how would they have to change?'

THE TEN COMPONENTS OF A THINKING ENVIRONMENT

It is important to recognise that the limiting assumption is not necessarily imaginary. The value is in helping the Thinker face the issue and consider it from different perspectives.

The Thinking Environment is highly effective in group work and meetings. One of the techniques here is the Thinking Round, which ensures everyone has a chance to say all they want to. As is the case with the Thinking Partnership, it is the contracting at the start of the meeting that brings the value.

"To be interrupted is not good.
"To get lucky and not be interrupted is better.
"But to know you will not be interrupted allows you truly to think for yourself."

Nancy Kline

The principles of the Thinking Environment bear similarities to coaching, which was being developed during the same period; both are fundamentally about respecting people, caring for their welfare and development, and building relationships grounded in trust. Some of the processes parallel tools used in coaching, such as Clean Language and the 'limiting beliefs' model espoused by NLP.

One difference is that Kline does not recommend reflecting the Thinker's words back, a common technique used by coaches.

Having experienced being coached by Kline at a demonstration, I found myself wishing that she would interrupt with the normal coaching interventions of clarifying, reflecting and questioning. However, I was able to identify that the root of my need was to create a distraction from some difficult issues! When given nothing other than 'What more?', I was forced to face these issues and, as a result, reached an unexpected breakthrough.

Kline's work highlights the effectiveness of giving people 'a good listening to' (and these are my words, not hers). There is much debate among coaches as to the most effective questions to ask, what supplementary techniques will lead to new insights for the client, what structures to use and how to 'dance' with the client in the coaching conversation. If we are not careful, the end result can be a coach who gallops all over clients like an enthusiastic pony, focusing on being a star performer instead of on the coachee's experience.

The biggest takeaway for me from the time I spent studying with Kline is a reinforcement of the power of listening, giving quality attention, and contracting to do so at the start, so my coachees have to focus only on their own thoughts without any distractions. ■

Further reading

1 Kline N *Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind* Cassell (1998)

2 Kline N *More Time to Think: A Way of Being in the World* Fisher King (2009)

3 Wilson C 'Tools of the trade' *Training Journal* (November 2008)

4 Wilson C 'Tools of the trade' *Training Journal* (April 2009)

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