

Creating time to think

The greatest gift that we can offer each other is a framework in which to think for ourselves.¹ The quality of a decision is equal to the quality of the thinking that has informed the making of it.

The Thinking Environment™ is a space in which people are able to think for themselves, and in which they find the courage to put their ideas and thinking into action. Thinking is a multi-faceted process of intelligence, and includes feelings, creativity, speculation and intuition, as well as cognition, analysis and computation. A Thinking Environment™ is one that enables a person to engage in a trustful and respectful relationship, a central component of which is 'attention.' Attention is described as the laser that ignites the human mind, and good attention towards the thinker is characterised by: delight in the thinker as a human being, unconditional approval, encouragement and interest in the thinker's thoughts.

From the many years that I have been engaged as a Thinking Environment™ consultant, I can confidently confirm that: 'The brain that contains the problem also contains the solution.' Consequently, it is crucial that boards and executives pay respectful attention to staff so that they can access their own ideas on how to improve and transform services.

Listening is a key to respectful attention. As a result of this, transformational leaders need to ensure that staff have the skills to listen effectively and develop sensing mechanisms to provide early warning of possible serious trouble. In addition, it is essential for staff members to be flexible and adaptable

in order to maximise conditions for anticipated opportunities.

The drive to be exemplary, efficient and effective in an ever increasing and uncertain environment means that boards, executives and staff need to be skilled at generating ideas and possibilities for action that could transform an organisation.

From 2001-2011, I chaired a primary care trust that was faced with a large financial challenge in 2006. I listened to staff regarding what was required to turn the organisation around, as a result of which I set about changing the whole board (all executives and non-executives). I appointed a new board and, in partnership with the new chief executive, set the objective of clearing a financial deficit of £21.5m in two years, while also maintaining quality services and delivering on key performance indicators. The goal of clearing the deficit was achieved in the intended timescale.

Conditions that facilitated the transformation were:

- Strong emotional intelligence;
- Use of thinking councils;
- Planned transformation by diagnosing the source of the problem.

Transformational leaders need to look to four areas to find the basic information they need to make a good diagnosis of their organisation:

- Engaging in personal introspection to determine strengths, weaknesses and blind spots;
- Facilitating analysis and introspection among a critical mass of individuals who make up the top-management team to ensure that they work for a common organisational goal together rather than against one another;

Meeting the demand to be exemplary, efficient and effective...

- Generating organisational control systems to provide good data on the relevant health of different aspects of a primary care trust;
- Paying rigorous attention to careful scanning of the environment.²

The complex task of leading with an effective cultural change in management was underpinned by my one-to-one listening, Thinking Environment™ coaching and Thinking Environment Council™ sessions with executive and non-executive directors, in which I asked them: 'What do you think, feel or want to say about the issues and solutions?' Donald Schon states that: 'The first and perhaps most critical leadership task is framing the problem... The process by which we define the decision to be made, the ends to be achieved, the means which may be chosen³... A leader's first job is to create a thinking environment. Every subsequent act of leadership gains quality from there.'⁴

Leading in testing times demands sophisticated processes of articulating a compelling vision, enhancing the skills of the workforce, and engaging people intelligence and creativity, as well as creating the space so that people can do their best to manifest the compelling vision.

In order to get the best from people, it is crucial to access their best thinking by listening to their views, aspirations and opinions. It also requires a leader to both put coaching at the centre of their expertise, and also know how to be with people, how to offer them the highest quality attention based on genuine interest in what they think and on the expectation that people can think for themselves.



Thus, getting the best from people involves coaching and knowing how to ask incisive questions that remove limiting assumptions. It also involves acknowledging people's strength and achievements, and encouraging them to take responsible risks in the building of their teams. Leaders who are involved in creating and shaping change at unprecedented rates have to be able to: think for themselves, and set up the conditions in every interaction and meeting that allow people at all levels to think for themselves with rigour, imagination, courage and grace.

Relationship skills are important and represent a key strategic resource. Building relationship capital requires understanding and identifying the key relationships in your business and using practical strategies for leveraging them to improve business goals and outcomes. To achieve the turnaround within my primary care trust, the strategic relationship with chief executive and leader of the local authority was crucial. The collaboration of the joint strategic partnership was exemplary, and other organisations within the NHS family played a key role.

Good relationships with a wide range of people are necessary, and specific skills are involved to improve social effectiveness. The first includes becoming aware of work and social

and political environments, teaching the leader when, where and why to begin and end a variety of interactions. The second part involves interpersonal skills enhancement, which covers verbal and non-verbal aspects of personal interactions – how to be a good listener, how to switch topics, etc. The third aspect centres on presentation skills: how to position the story; what to accentuate, and when and where; and how to use influencing and negotiating skills to achieve strategic advantage.

No business, whatever its size, can function without collaborative relationships, because such engagement provides the context within which people do business. A leader's key challenge is to engage the hearts, minds, emotions and intellects of the entire workforce to deliver superior service and business performance.

I used 'The Time To Think Council' as a fundamental tool in transforming board meetings. This is a very effective way of solving problems, allowing for the wisdom of the group to make its way unobtrusively into the problem-solving process of one person – in this instance, the intelligence that the chair needed to employ in resolving and taking issues forward. Each board member is asked to give their best thinking on a problem, which means that everyone thinks for themselves

and listens well to other ideas, with the result that everyone's thoughts are improved.

About the author

As Managing Director of Beacon Organisational Development and former Chairman of a primary care trust with 21 years non-executive experience, I have used David Rock's work on 'brain-based coaching',⁵ Dan Siegel's 'Interpersonal Neurobiology'⁶ and Martyn Newman's⁷ work on 'Emotional Capital' in association with Nancy Kline's studies on leading complex and transformational change. I have the first-hand political acumen and leadership skills to support you and your organisation to succeed in these uncertain times.

¹ Nancy Kline (2009), *More Time To Think: A Way Of Being In The World*, Fisher King Publishing

² Noel M Tichy and Mary A Devanna, (1990), *The Transformational Leader*, p 94, John Wiley & Sons

³ Donald Schon, (1978), *Beyond the Stable State*, Random House

⁴ Nancy Kline, (1999), *Time To Think, Listening To Ignite the Human Mind*, London Cassell

⁵ David Rock & Linda J Page, (2009), *Coaching with the Brain and The Mind*, John Wiley & Sons

⁶ Dan Siegel, *Interpersonal Neurobiology: An Integrative handbook of the Mind*

⁷ Martyn Newman, (2009), *Emotional Capitalist: The New Leaders*, Josey Bass



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