

The Thinking Environment: A Force For Positive Change

I have worked in Pharmaceutical R&D, with Beecham & Pfizer, for nearly 30 years. During that time I have attended numerous management and leadership courses. Most have been one-day wonders. Only one had a profound and transformational effect on me as a leader in senior management: learning how to lead in a Thinking Environment. So, let me tell you why I am so passionate about it.

The two key principles underlying the Thinking Environment are:

- The quality of everything we do depends on the thinking we do first.
- Our thinking depends on the quality of our attention for each other.

Given the scope of this article I will talk about only seven of the Ten Components of a Thinking Environment, but each is important, and it is actually in their interplay that all ten components have their greatest effect.

Attention: Listening with respect, interest, fascination and without interruption

I recently attended a 6-day Thinking Environment course at the end of which participants were asked to describe in a single word their experience. My choice was “revelation”. I had been shocked that my attention never wandered during the entire course. My attention was absolute, and I thoroughly enjoyed this new experience.

Armed with an extensive list of dos and don'ts for creating a Thinking Environment, I journeyed one evening with my wife to New York. We decided to have a Thinking Session during the trip. In the past Frances had joked about being “processed” by my newly acquired skills. What we were both about to experience, however, was truly uplifting, one of the best evenings in over 30 years of marriage.

I began by asking the simple question, “What do you want to think about?”

Frances started off by saying, “I was thinking about whether we should I'd like to talk about the pros and cons.” She continued for almost an hour without my interrupting at any point. At the end of the session, she said that she felt just great, saying, “Thanks for giving me the opportunity to think out loud, not to be judged and be able to think through everything really clearly. I know that you were there listening, but I felt that I was totally thinking for myself in an uninhibited, almost sublime state. I have a great feeling of self-worth, and I know that my opinions really matter.”

For me as a Thinking Partner, I was truly fascinated by her creative and insightful ideas as well as the clarity of thought and the self-debate that went on using balanced arguments. Amazingly for me, it felt good not interrupting, a rare event in thirty years.

Equality: Treating each other as thinking peers

I am pleased to say that my leadership team at work embodies this equality component. It includes a range of job levels, from vice president to junior project manager. Equality has definitely helped this last junior team member feel included much more rapidly.

Unlike the usual professor/student relationship, team members behave as equal thinkers. At our meetings, everyone is given equal turns and attention. I am convinced that the respect that everyone gives to each other produces better thinking and quicker decisions.

“How do you stop the boss manipulating the round to get the last word in?” was a question from a recent meeting. Again, the equality component proved to be the solution. In other words, asking volunteers to begin the round in a random fashion gets around this problem by not having the leader necessarily finish the round.

Appreciation: Practicing a five-to-one ratio of appreciation to criticism

At our last leadership team meeting, everyone agreed that appreciation was important.

For me, not to be artificial is key. Sincerity during appreciation and during listening is so

important. One member of the leadership team declared the same, "Praise must be sincere, otherwise, it may seem like you are setting the person up for the big one. You need to build up trust first, before practicing the 5:1 ratio." In other words, it is important not to use insincere appreciation as a forerunner to criticism.

Encouragement: Moving beyond competition

Encouragement in the context of the Thinking Environment is, as the name literally means, the giving of courage to the thinker to go to the limits of their ideas. This is made possible by eliminating all forms of competition during discussions.

When I first inherited my current research group, there was a complete divide between the front-end Discovery scientists and their Development counterparts. The groups were geographically separate, rarely met each other and operated with a silo mentality. The worst aspect, however, was the competition between the two groups for resources, both in people and in dollars.

The first meeting I chaired between the two groups reflected this competition and polarization, with very little in the way of fresh thinking and progress toward a common understanding. Only when everyone realized that we needed to compete against the opposition and not ourselves did we see a major turnaround. By eliminating internal competition mutual respect was gradually restored and prior combatants became supporters.

It was just at this time that I had the good fortune to be introduced to the Thinking Environment. Without exception the united group embraced the methodology and realized quickly the powerful relationship between encouragement and eliminating internal competition. No longer did people verbally attack each other, grimace or raise their eye-brows during discussions. I am particularly gratified to see the level of genuine encouragement shown by our team members and this has resulted in many important, synergistic ideas being generated.

Feelings: Allowing sufficient emotional release to restore thinking

One of my managers recently experienced this component firsthand. A scientist in his group came to tell him that an important project needed to be stopped because of unfavorable data. So attached was his subordinate to the project that this scientist broke down. After listening through the upset feelings, my manager simply said, "Thanks for telling me. What do you think we should do now?" This simple question put the person at ease and good ideas emerged.

Information: Providing a full and accurate picture of reality

The two main elements of the Information component of the Thinking Environment which resonate with me are:

1. Listening fully without interrupting to acquire full information, and
2. Facing up to reality.

The Amy Question (so-called because of the woman who first constructed it) requires you to supply and face your own information. It is: "What do you know now that you are going to find out in a year?" If I had known of the existence of this Amy question, I would have perhaps avoided the worst hiring mistake of my career. I had convinced myself that we should hire a certain candidate knowing deep down that we were making a mistake. Within a year or so, the mistake became obvious and that particular person eventually left the company.

Incisive Questions: Removing assumptions that limit ideas

During my recent experiences of using the Thinking Environment in one-to-one meetings, I have seen the power of the Incisive Question. As soon as the limiting assumption is removed and the Incisive Question posed, I have invariably seen light bulbs going off in the person's

mind, truly an exciting and fascinating thing to watch.

As Nancy says in her book, " A question works because, unlike a statement which requires you to obey, a question requires you to think. The mind seems to prefer to think, not to obey."

In Summary

The ten essential components to the Thinking Environment need to be thoroughly understood and practiced. Each one in its own way undoubtedly improves the quality of thinking for every person. The Thinking Environment is a concept that works. I strongly recommend it both for individuals and for corporations.