

The Thinking Environment[®]: *Road Test*



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The tool

What is it?

The **Thinking Environment**[®] is a *way of being* more than a tool, built on a unique framework for generative thinking developed by Nancy Kline of *Time to Think*. It's underpinned by the belief that the quality of everything we do depends on the thinking we do first and, given the right conditions, we can all think well for ourselves. Key to this is how we are treated by the people with us whilst we're thinking. If we're interrupted, taken off track with a question, judged, hurried, belittled, or ignored we stop thinking well. Yet if we're allowed to go where we want and need to go with our thinking, we'll create something more intelligent, useful, liberating and energising – something we're more likely to implement successfully. The mind that holds the problem is usually the best mind to solve it and as many of our problems are founded upon untrue assumptions in our minds that we live as true, the TE / Time to Think process helps us to uncover these and choose credible alternatives that are liberating and true.

The TE has Ten Components - elements and behaviours that individually and collectively appear to impact on people's ability for independent, generative thinking. At the heart of these is "Attention" - giving the "Thinker" uninterrupted, respectful, fascinated and sustained attention. Others are: Ease, Equality, Appreciation, Encouragement, Feelings, Place, Information, Diversity and Incisive questions™; each has particular meaning and significance within TE.

TE can be used with individuals, teams, groups, whole organisations, and in personal or work settings – in fact anywhere wherever better thinking is desired. In this article we focus on its use within coaching.

How does it work?

The cornerstone of the Thinking Environment is the Thinking Partnership (TP) session which Kline evolved from many years of study into how the human mind thinks best. A TE coaching session follows along very similar lines. Firstly the coach explains the TE and contracts on several areas, most importantly a guarantee not to interrupt. The setting is quiet, calm, private and comfortable. Then in response to the coach asking "What do you want to think about, and what are your thoughts?" the client thinks or articulates whatever they wish whilst the coach gives *total, easeful* attention. As the client's thinking gains momentum, they effectively self-coach – reflecting, connecting, generating new ideas, articulating their true feelings, having "aha" moments, prioritising and challenging. When their thinking is exhausted, the coach invites a new wave by asking "What more do you think, or feel, or want to say?" and the client continues to generate more. Sometimes the whole session continues in this way, other times it moves into a different phase so the coach will ask very specific questions to help the client to reach a conclusion. Either way, the client leaves feeling relieved, decisive and purposeful, deeply satisfied that they've fully thought through and determined their own course of action – and often astounded at what they have achieved in just one session.

It is rare in life to encounter all Ten Components together and it's likely that this makes the TE such a transformational coaching experience. The TE probably quiets the amygdala and creates feeling of safety, trust and attachment, generating approach and attachment hormones such as oxytocin, dopamine and serotonin, making it possible to think unhindered by fear. David Rock's SCARF model has some resonance here. And *knowing* that you will not be interrupted is a truly liberating experience.

The coach

The experience

The Thinking Environment is remarkably versatile – apply it in any setting and thinking improves. Some coaches use TE as a standalone approach, others combine it with other tools. When I encountered it several years ago I assumed (as a former therapist) that giving this kind of Attention would be easy to master. How wrong I was! It sounds simple and yet it is deeply demanding work for both the coach (and sometimes the client). We have been trained to ask questions to stimulate thinking; in TE we have minimal questioning because all the components support independent thinking.

After many years of practice, I am now more comfortable with not asking too many questions or offering input because I'm acutely aware of how they can "assault" thinking. We can give content when needed, but only when we are sure that the client has done all the thinking they can do, independently of ours. Anyone can apply the principles of TE – those wishing to develop expertise can train as a Thinking Partner or to become a licensed Coach, or Facilitator or finally, Consultant and join the worldwide Time to Think Collegiate.

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The client

The experience

I knew the TE approach intends to create "independent" thinking and was expecting the coach to do very little – allowing me to freewheel. I imagined it would be easy. The reality was somewhat different - it was probably one of my toughest coaching experiences yet. During the first 20 minutes I was happily free-wheeling and exploring my own thinking, asking and answering my own questions as I worked uninterrupted. That in itself is a rare treat – a promise that no matter how much you go "off piste" – you will not be interrupted. At times I felt like I had "run dry", not sure what / where to go next. I looked back to the coach for some "help". Traditional coaches might have made an observation, provided a summary or perhaps a challenge. The Time to Think coach simply asked "What more do you think, or feel or want to say?" What happens then is an "as if by magic" experience – whereas a moment ago I had been stuck, my brain gathered new energy and I typically found "something more". It was as though I was opening little cupboards in my brain to see what was in there. Some were empty but others held a trigger that led to another wave for my monologue. This required a surprising amount of mental effort.

I've had short and longer TE sessions face to face and phone, but each time I reached some kind of resolution. By the end of the sessions not only was there a way forward, there was a lightness and certainty about the "truth" of that solution for me. I have found that with more traditional coaching, outcomes which can seem eminently do-able in the session don't actually get achieved; perhaps the session momentum gets deflated once real life happens. So far every outcome I have reached as a Thinker has led to taking action. Importantly, I was so clear that this was absolutely what I needed to do, that there was no angst when reflecting on my decision.

The TE approach genuinely allows you to come up with your own original solutions. Doing this without any input on content can be challenging, and there were moments of vulnerability when voicing my "unchecked" thinking. However, the coach was my rock – bringing a quality of presence and support which says – "go on, say whatever you think, I'll be here with you".

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Pros and Cons

Upsides

- Creates trust, offers respect, autonomy and optimism for the client
- Gets the coach out the client's way like nothing else we've encountered!
- Having experienced this quality of listening for themselves, clients becomes better listeners
- Often gets to – and resolves - the key issues quicker than traditional coaching.

Downsides

- Some clients expect the coach to "do something" and find it uncomfortable, particularly at first
- Requires the coach to put away their toolkit, to be an equal not an expert, and to just "be" - which can be challenging
- Requires extensive practice to really master it.