

Reflections on a Transforming Meetings Day - Nancy Kline - 8 12 2008

I presented the Transforming Meetings day last week. The client is a construction company that produces infrastructure for the UK: roads, sewers, bridges, rail, water piping — the heavy, without-which stuff of life. Time To Think has for two years been one module in their ten-module leadership development programme. We have by now taught about 150 top managers. Every day is splendid. The participants love the practicality and immediate use-ability of what they learn on the day. They also love the respect they feel in the room, and the different, new quality of thinking that emerges. They feel energetic at the end. And every time I am impressed by their integrity and no-nonsense perspective on ways to become Thinking Environments, and their commitment to the huge change that will involve. Last week was no different. Except more so.

I saw once again that, even with 15 participants (which I consider large) our meeting structure is magic. Without it, 15 people becomes nearly stupid. With it they become nearly geniuses. And the energy they start to feel and sustain throughout the day is startling.

There were two moments in particular I thought were gorgeous. 1) We were in the middle of the practice meeting. The question they had agreed to consider as the Agenda Item was: *How can we as a company insulate ourselves from the predicted recession?* The practicing Chair proposed that the group break up into Thinking Pairs for 3 minutes each to get their thinking started. After the Pairs, he started the Round. Immediately the first three people proposed three superb long-term strategies. Then one man said, 'And another thing we could do (and we actually could do this whereas the other ideas, which are great, we can only recommend to the Executive Committee) would be to start a campaign company-wide that could be called *SAVE-A-POUND-A-DAY*. I have figured out that if every employee everyday saves the company a pound, we would save the company more than a million pounds by this time next year. And although that will of course not insulate us from the recession in and of itself, far from it, it will nevertheless engage us all in being powerful to help in this hard time. And a million pounds is not nothing!'

As the Round continued, person after person got really excited about the Save A £ A Day idea. And each also offered other superb longer-term ideas of various kinds.

Then one of the participants, in the Open Discussion (which was done with model attention and respect) said, 'This is completely amazing. Look at us. Look at what has happened. We are actually creating real and do-able ideas on this training course. It is not a training course any more. It is life. And this structure is making it all happen. We have never thought or been like this before.'

Others agreed. The energy rose. It was not frantic energy. It was that lovely easeful, joyous energy that makes thinking even better.

We practiced using the flip chart. (I love teaching about the stupidity of the flip chart and how, once flip charts start being used, people gaze at it during others' turns to speak as if it were intelligent and about to utter profundities any second. They laughed when I pointed that out and immediately turned their attention to the speaker.) The scribe captured four main ideas, and then the group designed a way to keep communicating with each other this week in order to get approval for the £ A Day campaign and to get their other ideas to their bosses.

It was, as I said, gorgeous.

Anyway, here is what I re-learned:

All interactions emerge from a structure. It is important to notice the structure we are using at the moment and assess its effectiveness. Then we must change the structure to make it effective. The question is not, 'Shall we use a structure or not?' The question is, "What structure are we using, and what structure would we use if we wanted to generate the finest thinking and the most energy and dignity?' Most meetings and conversations in the world emerge from an unproductive, demeaning, frantic, trampling structure. Meetings and conversations that emerge from a Thinking Environment are productive, dignifying, easefully energetic, and nurturing of best thinking.

We then had 40 minutes left before we would have to stop in order not to rush the closing Rounds. I was not sure we could do the Time To Think Council beautifully-enough in 40 minutes, but I offered them the challenge, and they were more than up for it.

The Council was a work of art.