

Why we need to stop asking so many questions – and what to do instead!

Part 2

The Ten components of a Thinking Environment¹

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

Ease: Offering freedom from internal rush or urgency.

Equality: Treating each other as thinking peers; giving equal turns and attention; keeping agreements and boundaries.

Appreciation: Offering genuine acknowledgement of a person's qualities; practising a ratio of five to one of appreciation to criticism.

Encouragement: Giving courage to go the cutting edge of ideas by moving beyond internal competition.

Feelings: Allowing sufficient emotional release to restore thinking.

Place: Creating a physical environment that says back to people 'you matter'.

Information: Providing a full and accurate picture of reality; supplying the facts; dismantling denial.

Diversity: Welcoming divergent thinking and adding quality because of the difference between us.

Incisive questions™: Removing assumptions that limit our ability to think clearly and creatively.

Source:

www.timetothink.com²

In Part 1¹ of this article, Linda Aspey suggested that clients can think more independently when not led by too many questions, particularly when given sustained, uninterrupted Attention, one of the core components of the Thinking Environment (TE). Here, she outlines how she sees assessment and contracting, and introduces the other components of the Thinking Environment, an environment that can work well in an integrative coach-therapy approach

Waiting on the 18th floor of the rather faceless glass tower, I felt a strong presence as soon as Amira* walked in. A tall, imposing woman, she spoke rapidly, her words tumbling out in a forceful flurry like a machine gun. She'd done the same when we'd had an exploratory call on the phone soon after she'd had some fairly critical feedback from a 360° feedback exercise. I'd been left a little punch drunk by the conversation.

'Apparently,' she said, 'I've got to develop a different style of leadership, whatever that means. They say I create stress and I'm hard on people. I don't listen, I'm impatient and directive. Maybe I am. You have to be sometimes to get results, and some of the people here are just not up to it. Maybe I'm a control freak but I was born this way – in fact I probably told my mother how to change my nappy!'

She paused for the first time. 'Susan [the HRD] says I'll have to do some work if I'm going to be seen as top team material. Which is why I'm here.'

She stared hard at me, her voice now flat and cold. 'You're probably thinking I'm a complete head case, aren't you? You'll have your hands full with me.'

**Amira's name has been changed and her permission obtained to illustrate this article with segments of her sessions.*

Like many readers of this journal, I work with a range of clients in professional settings who largely want to develop their ability to manage stress, or their people management and leadership skills, and their personal productivity. Some come to understand more of themselves, often so they can better relate to and understand others. Some use their sessions as a vehicle to explore a range of feelings, to consider how their past is influencing the present, and do some restorative work within the context of a safe, professional relationship. And sometimes I meet clients who are in crisis, highly stressed, driven and controlling, egocentric and with possible egosyntonic traits or in some denial. Perhaps Amira was in this latter group, perhaps not.

Assessment, contracting and diversity in Thinking Environment work

Assessing a client's needs and whether or not and how the practitioner can meet them is important in any therapeutic or coaching relationship. However, because TE is more of a way of being than it is of doing, I think it requires a different approach.

Its underlying philosophy is that the quality of everything we do depends on the thinking we do first, and we do our finest thinking when someone else helps us by giving their attentive presence,

supported by the other components. That is all we are doing – helping someone to think really well by listening really well. When I say that is all, it's all that and more. We are helping them to generate new thinking. We're listening to ignite, not listening to respond. It is simple yet complex. We're not leading the client's new route; they are in the driving seat, we're providing the car.

Assessment in therapy and coaching seeks to achieve a balance of gathering and providing information – and getting that balance is key in TE work. Questions about why the client has come, their readiness and ability for change, risk assessment and suitability, their fit with the practitioner's level of skill and chosen approach etc – all these and more are usually considered.

However, working in this way is based upon one of the core applications of TE, the Thinking Partnership³, and depending on the context, there may be no need to ascertain all of these things so urgently; if important, they will generally unfold as the thinking unfolds. In my particular work with executives, executive teams, wider systems and multiple stakeholders, some of these questions do need to be asked at the start – what they might hope to get from coaching, what their current emotional state is, who else has an interest in

their development or performance, how they would know it had been useful, and so forth.

Amira provided me with some initial information. She'd been 'sent', she'd been given critical feedback, she offered me a challenge, I experienced her in a particular way. In TE work it's important to resist a 'diagnosis'. Naturally, we gain impressions of people and these have the potential to bias our views; but we must not analyse or interpret what is said, and instead we must focus on helping the client to think for themselves. This really is client-centred work.

We must also be willing for clients to hold different views from ourselves. I have found the TE particularly useful in working cross-culturally – Amira was raised in a culture where women were not expected to have their own career, and if they did, to stop working completely when they had children, so having both was 'wrong'. My role was not to challenge that belief system, but when a relevant situation arose at her work, to help Amira to explore how her belief impacted on her treatment of a direct report who did have children. This is a good example of how significant it can be to welcome and support diversity as it shows up in people's thinking, even when it doesn't concur with our own.

Feelings in the Thinking Environment

In a TE, it is usual for clients to express feelings, and sometimes they become distressed. As a former therapist, when I first encountered the TE, I was concerned that the explicit component of 'Feelings' might give clients the impression that this would be more therapy than coaching. In my experience, it doesn't, but it does offer a way of working integratively that allows the client to go as far as they wish down an emotional route. And yet, I think because of the containment offered by Attention and Ease, clients seem to be able to manage a boundary themselves. It makes it safe for the client to explore and if they do become distressed, the continuing experience of the TE helps them recover, generating fresh thinking soon afterwards. A bit like how after thunder and lightning the rain comes down, then the sun comes out and everything sparkles.

Is there anyone I wouldn't use the Thinking Environment with?

I don't think so, if they wanted it and if it was within my expertise. If the client would benefit from a different route such as CBT or referral to their GP, I will refer them on. But I am not generally working with people who have, for example, clinical depression or mental illness. Even if I were, what

a wonderful experience to have the genuine, attentive presence of another who wanted to hear what they had to say.

Is it right for everyone?

Some people can only bear this approach for so long before they ask me what I think, or say they hate this silence. In a coaching context, some expect their coach to also teach or offer consultancy ('After all, what



am I paying you all this money for?'). And, as Nancy Kline would say, some people have become addicted to getting answers. Interestingly, once they have settled into the relationship and experienced the Ease that comes with it, they learn how to be more reflective, less driven to get quick answers from others, and less driven to tell others what to think, which naturally benefits their lives and work outside of the session.

For some, it can feel very exposing, to talk uninterrupted, unhindered. Some feel judged by silence especially if silence has been used on them in that way before. Some people, particularly those who are shy, can be embarrassed at the level of Attention. In these cases, I can simply adapt my style, perhaps becoming more conversational until they relax into it. Mostly, given time, their anxieties do melt away and they learn to trust me and the process, value the Attention and luxuriate in the presence of another human being who offers them this special space.

And for some clients, it might be that I am just not the right person for them. Of course, that can happen whatever approach the practitioner uses.

Information in the Thinking Environment

Information is itself one of the TE Components – and it's important to consider what Information the client needs and how and when we should we offer it. For example, I will ask what they need to know about the Thinking Environment and will answer their questions. I explain that I believe that my role is to help them to think well for themselves, and not to offer guidance, advice or opinion until they have gone as far as they can in their own thinking, and then only if I am pretty sure that what I offer will help their thinking even more. And that great thinking can

occur in silence. I explain that I am also a trained therapist and integrate quite naturally the disciplines of coaching and therapy, although if traditional therapy is a more suitable option, we can explore referral.

It can be useful to send the client an outline of the TE and some relevant articles. Amira arrived intrigued by the idea, whilst at the same time concerned that as she could already 'talk for England', she might not gain any benefit. However, if you ask a client if they have ever experienced sustained attention from someone in an environment free from interruptions, fear, judgement or competition, where appreciation is more important than criticism and where they can express their feelings freely, most will tell you 'no'. Amira certainly did.

When clients ask me, 'What do you think?' I will usually say, 'Can we see first if you can generate some more thinking on it before I offer mine?' They usually agree and I'll ask the 'What more?' question.

However, providing a Thinking Environment does not mean that we cannot answer any questions directly. Information is useful if there are some facts that will help thinking, or if the client is denying something that is true and it would be helpful, as Nancy Kline says, 'to dismantle denial'.

Sometimes, if asked, I will give an opinion because I am human and that can create Equality. And sometimes I'll answer because it's just plain frustrating for the client and feels too much like psychoanalysis if I repeatedly refuse to answer a question.

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And whilst naturally, with our training and experience, we can offer clients models, frameworks and perspectives, or suggest some useful reading, we have to be sure that this information is in the service of the client's continued thinking, not so we can show off what we know.

This 'Spectrum of Independence'³ is always present in our minds as TE practitioners – how do we encourage a client to keep thinking for themselves, and when do we move along the spectrum towards potentially directing their thinking?

Setting out the Thinking Environment

In a TE, having a 'Place' that is conducive to thinking is particularly important; sustained quiet, privacy, comfort – and the place should tell people that they matter.

I keep the explanation of the Thinking Environment fairly brief. There is no need to explain all 10 components in detail – the client can read about them if they wish. The most important thing is that they experience them. However, explaining Attention is important at the very start – because, unlike some forms of coaching and therapy, TE questions are few, the coach's eye contact is constant and their Attention is profound. If the client doesn't know this is going to happen, and agree to it, it can be unnerving.

And I explain assumptions. They are present in everything we do, and often limit thinking because they tend to be negative or self-critical. Even mentioning them at the start of the session seems to help the client to deal with them. As they settle into the session and hear themselves thinking aloud, it's quite usual for a client to suddenly stop mid sentence, with a rhetorical question: 'Hold on a minute. What am I assuming here about this?' They have generated a new thought. Lightbulb moment! They then go on to uncover a multitude of

assumptions, and then often without verbal prompting from me, bat them all away like flies. ‘That’s daft. Of course that won’t happen. And even if it does, I have ways of managing the situation.’

Ease, Equality, Encouragement and Appreciation

Often in the settings in which I work, clients assume that I will tell them what to think, what I think, and expect ‘tough love’ – particularly, I have found, those in competitive environments. Amira told me that she’d had a coach a couple of years ago who was ‘good’ because she was ‘very tough on me’. They want to be challenged, to engage in banter and sometimes compete for intellectual superiority (the same can be said of some practitioners with their clients!). Some want a wise guru, others like being admonished or teased. I can do this as well as the next person. It’s even fun sometimes. But does it really help the client?

Core to the TE is creating conditions for the client to generate their own finest thinking, create their own solutions, make their own changes. Many clients already hear a lot of other people’s thinking (often in the form of criticism about what they need to change or sycophantic praise because they’re in senior roles) and haven’t done enough of their own thinking, their own creating. There is no

reason for me to add to that. I am their equal, not an expert or their teacher or their critic, and not there to assess against my own frame of reference.

(Equality is a particularly important component when using the TE with groups, to ensure that everyone’s voice matters, so that whatever is created comes from everyone’s thinking.)

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Equally, I want to calm their amygdala, not excite it, to create Ease not urgency. There has been a great deal of research into the effect of competition on the brain and body. For example, in what has been called ‘The Winner Effect’⁴, in men, especially younger men, testosterone rises in competitive situations, and success dramatically lowers the risk of fear. Intense failure leads to a rise in levels of cortisol, the anti-testosterone hormone that lowers the appetite for risk across a range of decisions.

However, if I am helping someone to *think*, I don’t want to create conditions where they win or lose. And if in their leadership role they are helping others to think, I hope they can

create conditions in which everyone’s thinking can flourish, not just those who thrive in competitive situations.

Encouragement is essential in the TE: that means not competing with clients for the best ideas, and encouraging them to go as far as they can in their own thinking. And Appreciation – the act of recognising and valuing a true quality in someone, not as a response to their status, or our own need to be liked – is so important in this work. Interestingly, research at the Institute of HeartMath⁵ shows that Appreciation and other heartfelt feelings such as love, care and compassion actually change the heart rhythms and can have profound positive effects on our cardiovascular systems and overall health.

The ‘Thinking Partnership’, Assumptions and Incisive Questions™

The Thinking Partnership is a staged process with Part 1 being ‘free exploration’ where we ask: ‘What would you like to think about and what are your thoughts?’ Aided by Attention and all the other components, the client will effectively self-coach. When the conditions are right the mind seems to do for itself naturally what the coach will do. When needed, we will ask, ‘What more do you think, feel or want to say?’ and that will enable the client to continue to generate new

thinking. If we occasionally depart from the TP session, it's because we have contracted to do so, perhaps by agreeing to set goals right at the start.

In part 1 of this article¹, I explained that many clients reach the end of the TE Part 1 and can conclude the session there. They know what they want to do next and how. Sometimes they need more and that's when we move into Part 2. We invite them to name a further session goal: 'What more would you like to achieve with the rest of the session?' and then they will usually reflect for a moment. Occasionally, they will go back into Part 1 and do some more free exploration. At other times, they will name a goal associated with their thinking in Part 1.

Nancy Kline has identified potentially eight different types of goal and we will work with each one slightly differently. Many of these goals are linked to limiting assumptions, others to a need for more information or activity.

Amira, at the end of a very productive Part 1 in our first session, said that she wanted to become less controlling. She was exhausted by it and it was driving people away. She wanted to lighten up a little, be more patient and enjoy life more. In TE work, if we're going to help clients to work on their goals, we need them to be worded in

a way that we can remember, because we are going to remind them of their goal again and again in the session – in their own words. So I asked Amira if she could shorten that into fewer words. She thought for a while and said: 'I'd like to let go a little.' I then asked her: 'What are you assuming that is stopping you from letting go a little?'

Often an untrue, limiting assumption is being lived as if it's true: it's vital to help the client to unpick this, and recognise it as untrue and limiting

Her eyes widened in surprise. And then one by one, her assumptions came piling out. 'I'm assuming that I can't because I've always been like this. I'm assuming that things will go wrong if I am not in complete charge.' After uncovering a few more assumptions, she fell silent. I waited a while and then asked her: 'What else are you assuming that is

stopping you from letting go a little?' and yet more assumptions emerged.

When all these assumptions have been voiced, we can help the client to identify which of these is most stopping them from achieving their goal and then, against a set of clear and neutral criteria, ascertain if it's true, possibly true or untrue. Often an untrue, limiting assumption is being lived as if it's true: it's vital to help the client to unpick this, and recognise it as untrue and limiting. Then we invite them to think instead about what is true and liberating for them in order to achieve their goal.

In this first session, Amira's goal was 'to let go a little' and her most powerful assumption was that she had to be in control in all situations, which she decided, when we explored and tested it, wasn't true. What was true and liberating – in her words – was that she 'could let others take the lead from time to time'. Finally, by creating an Incisive Question™ using exactly her own words and her own goal, and the question 'If you knew that you could let others take the lead from time to time, how would you let go a little?', a list of brand new possibilities unfolded, full of energy and ownership. Clients may have been living their assumptions as true for years, and realising how they have hampered their

lives is sometimes quite shocking and always liberating. (Time to Think and More Time to Think³ explain this question-crafting process in greater detail.)

I have found that working in this way creates an environment of deep unconditional positive regard, healing and goal orientation that suits even the most challenging of clients. Amira and I subsequently worked together over six months. At times, it was extremely tiring for both of us – I needed regular supervision to keep me grounded and I had to work particularly hard to maintain Ease.

By the end, though, Amira emerged much more secure in herself, more able to like herself, more tolerant, significantly more appreciative of others' efforts, and more able to create a Thinking Environment for others. She had let go a little and in return gained a great deal.



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www.coachingforleaders.co.uk

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