

Coaching in practice: the Thinking Environment®



Megan Peppin is an organisation development (OD) consultant, teacher/mentor, facilitator and coach, and she is a Thinking Environment® practitioner and teacher.

What is the approach you use in coaching (the theoretical model, its premises/ underlying beliefs or reasons for being developed etc)?

I have trained with Nancy Kline over the last seven years and am deeply committed to utilising the Thinking Environment® approach to coaching. This involves the coach creating a safe environment for the coachee (or perhaps the 'thinker?') to truly think for themselves. Like many coaching approaches, it's a relationship of equality. The focus is on the coachee thinking independently, so the coach contracts not to interrupt the coachee with their thinking until the coachee has fully exhausted their own thinking. In the pause, there is very often more thinking taking place.

Most of our blocks are experienced where we are living false assumptions as true; in the Thinking Environment® coaching, our questions are centred around exploring untrue assumptions. We map what we think the mind does when it's working things out for itself. Interventions are centred around exploring assumptions or offering information/dismantling denial to keep the coachee/thinker thinking for themselves.

Why were you drawn to this approach/model and how did you go about becoming skilled/ qualified in it?

I have been an organisational development (OD) practitioner for 25 years, and I guess you could say that facilitation draws heavily on coaching practices (or vice versa?), so I had lots of experience. I was occasionally invited to coach others; however, I had no coach training and I felt something was lacking. I knew some coaches

who inspired me to explore more. I trained as a coach with the OCM Group about 10 years ago, which was a significant step for me in professionalising my coaching work, and pulling together my existing body of knowledge into a coaching offering. That training provided me with a strong foundation. Something was missing for me, however; something elusive. As part of my professional development, in 2013 I attended a Time to Think workshop – more out of curiosity than anything else – and from that, something was sparked. I attended another workshop, and another. Something that had always puzzled me about coaching was how people could really think for themselves when the coach was asking questions and those questions came from the coach's line of enquiry.

I worked for three years, practising weekly thinking partnerships – uninterrupted waves of thinking – and then trained as a coach with Nancy. I then went on to train as a Thinking Environment® teacher.

I love the freedom of 'not knowing' and the depth of connection that comes from giving another person such generative attention

Do you work with a particular client group and how do your clients benefit from the fact that you take this particular approach to coaching?

By nature, OD work is not sector specific, so my coachees are also from a range of sectors. They currently comprise directors and those in senior management roles, other coaches/facilitators and people interested in exploring their potential. I think my clients benefit through developing the courage to truly listen to and hear themselves.

We don't really know what we think until we hear ourselves articulate our deeply held thoughts, often unexpressed and unnamed, out loud; that can and does change our relationship with them. We are good at stifling our innermost thoughts, feeling the feelings that are hard to feel. Having the courage to go to our edge, to feel the feelings, acts as a release for much clearer thinking. That's the moment when lightness surfaces.

What do you most love about being this kind of coach? Have you experienced this kind of coaching in your life and how does it resource you as a practitioner?

I love the freedom of 'not knowing' and the depth of connection that comes from giving another person such generative attention. We meet as equals and my assumption is that people's minds are amazing. If I really give them all of my attention, with the intention of keeping them thinking for themselves – it's incredible how far they can go before they need my thinking.

The Thinking Environment® includes a system of 10 components that, when combined, seem to enable people to do their best thinking. As a practitioner, I describe it as a gently radical transformation. It is utterly simple, yet requires so much discipline. Not to interrupt, not to infantilise, not to jump in with my thinking. To live the assumption that others have amazing minds, and to give them time to keep thinking. Most of my work is OD consulting, and every time I open my mouth, I hold in mind the thought: what am I in service of? Hearing my thinking, or creating time for more of their thinking to emerge?

Are there any downsides or difficulties to working in this way?

For me personally, I can't imagine another path. Maybe I had to do all the other stuff to arrive here; now I am here, it is utterly liberating. At times, I feel the challenge of someone asking me for my thinking, and I wonder whether I continue giving them time to keep thinking, or whether an intervention from me will genuinely keep them going. I think there is an expectation around 'being coached', where not saying very much can create

anxiety – we are so used to being interrupted, validated, reassured, challenged. In our busy lives, stillness can feel counterintuitive.

Could you share a tool or framework or aspect of this approach that other coaches might be able to use or draw on now in their work with clients?

My early introduction to this framework was in a workshop (with the divine Lindsay Wittenberg) where we were given a listening exercise: to listen to another person for 10 minutes, and the only question we could ask was '...and what more?' Think about the mind and thinking moving in waves and pauses. In the pause, that is where we often offer an exchange. In the pause, instead of asking a question, think to yourself: 'I wonder what they will think next?' Stay in the pause; often, another wave of thinking emerges. When you do decide to ask a question, try '...and what more?'; gently, with ease, and assume that there is very likely more to follow.

We are so used to being interrupted, validated, reassured, challenged. In our busy lives, stillness can feel counterintuitive

If people are interested in finding out more, what can they read or where could they explore it through CPD or fully train in it?

There is the Time to Think website (below), and I run teaching courses several times a year. One introductory training is the Thinking Partnership – a wonderful introduction to the findings of the Thinking Environment® with a small group. All the findings are introduced through an entirely experiential programme. This runs over three days, currently adapted to work via digital platforms. This is a good route in for coaches wanting to know more, and is a requirement for the coach qualification. Come and find me and we'll think together. ■

megp@mppartnership.co.uk
www.mppartnership.co.uk
www.timetothink.com