



when we think
great actions begin with great thinking

The Thinking Environment - a system for psychological safety

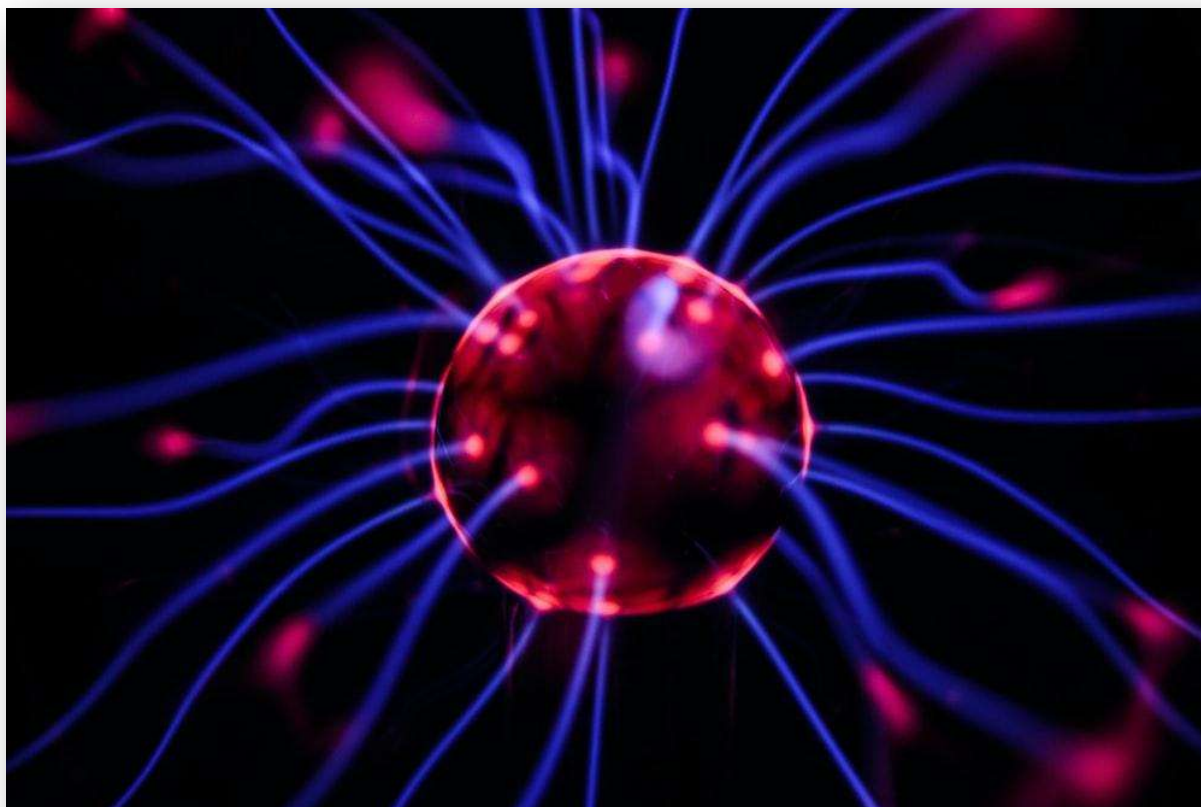


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I have been thinking a lot recently about my brain! Specifically, how it evolved to keep me safe in a vastly different world from the one I actually inhabit, and what impact that has on me and my thinking.

I recently read that apparently, our brains are hard-wired to keep us safe for the next ten seconds. So, when we perceive a threat our instincts kick in so that we can do what needs to be done to stay alive.

Thankfully, the threats that most of us face in the 21st Century are not to our lives. They are maybe to our pride or self-esteem. Perhaps to an established belief, or a relationship. What stopped me in my tracks, was finding out that although these threats are vastly different in nature, apparently the instinctive and emotional centres in our brains can't tell the difference! We have simply not evolved for them to be able to do so.

Even more interesting, in the context of the Thinking Environment anyway, is the effect that instinctual and emotional response can have on our prefrontal cortex. The cognitive critical thinking bit.

Briefly, when our instinctive threat responses are triggered (maybe our boss criticises us, triggering a fearful or perhaps angry internal reaction) our prefrontal cortex becomes pretty ineffective.

There are many strategies that we can use personally to maintain a greater awareness of our instinctive emotional responses and learn ultimately to bring these under greater control. Practicing mindfulness and yoga really help me.

So, is there anything that we can do in how we are with one another, to reduce the likelihood that we will inadvertently trigger these responses in those around us?

Can we create an environment within which there is no threat? Where those with us can feel truly psychologically safe, and ultimately keep their thinking at its best.

What I know is that I experience that every time that I am in a skilfully maintained Thinking Environment.

Over the last five years, I have observed the changes in a team of 20, as the Thinking Environment has gradually become “the way we do things”. The most striking change is to how honestly issues are tackled, and feelings expressed. To how safe people feel to think openly, honestly, as themselves.

And that got me wondering some more....

Is a Thinking Environment an incredibly effective system for creating and maintaining Psychological Safety?

And if so, how does each component contribute?



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Attention

Listening without interruption and with interest in where the person will go next in their thinking.

We live in a world of interruption. A world that jostles at every turn for our attention. From pinging social media notifications and emails to attention grabbing adverts and headlines. So often we don't get to finish what we are thinking or doing before something or someone interrupts us.

We interrupt each other in conversation, finishing each other's thoughts, sometimes even sentences. We are programmed to put our own point forwards. Genuinely wanting to

help, to move others towards the solutions that they can't see for themselves (yet seem so blindingly obvious to us).

We've become programmed to listen in order to respond with our own views. All the time, forming our words in our heads as the other talks. Imagine doing that with music for a moment. When was the last time you tried to listen to one melody, while humming another? So why should it be any different when it comes to thoughts?

Most of us experience this kind of attention for the majority of our lives. We listen and are listened to, in order to reply, fix, solve, sympathise, compete, argue, even win in conversation with each other.

We can think of this way of being, as the world of Exchange Thinking. Each of us listening so that we can reply to the other. At its absolute best, this world (if we are *truly* listening to the other) can be generative and collaborative.

But all too often I give something less. As I listen, I start to think of how I might respond. Because I assume a response is what you want from me. I begin to listen so that I can reply and direct your thinking. Thinking that my own ideas are JUST what you need to hear right now. It's so easy to move into believing that our own thoughts and ideas are somehow better, more important, more valid, than what the person in front of us is thinking *right now*. I do it at work, at home, all over the place.

And more often than not, I've been wrong!

So, what is the alternative?

Generative Attention is something different. When we choose to listen with generative attention, rather than to formulate a reply, we choose to ignite the thinking of those we are with.

When we can quiet our own minds (and quiet our mouths!) the Thinking of those around us begins to take on a whole different quality.

If we then take that a step further and **promise** that we won't interrupt, that *truly* frees others to Think, free of any threat of us trampling all over their ideas and thoughts.

And remember, the removal of threat makes us feel safe! The amygdala calms down and our prefrontal (thinking) brain can do its thing. Our brains begin to breathe.

This was really brought home to me when coaching recently. At so many points could have offered my perspective. I wanted to offer my perspective! I could have given a "shortcut" - a "try this", or a "have you read that". I could so easily have given in to my own curiosity and asked, "tell me more about that".

But I didn't.

Instead, I listened. I asked again and again what more this client thought, felt, or wanted to say. I wondered how much value I was adding. And I trusted the mind in front of me to go exactly where it needed to go, when it needed to go there.

Where it went was extraordinary. The breakthroughs were in no way affected by me. Yet my presence and attention mattered profoundly in their creation. That is the paradox of listening with generative attention.

Committing to pay FULL and undivided attention to what the other is thinking is vulnerable though. Especially when you are personally or professionally invested in the outcome. To put yourself entirely in their hands (or more accurately their thoughts) and go with it to wherever they end up, rather than providing the wisdom of your own genius, takes courage.

But when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable in this way, it can be so powerful. When we promise that no matter what thoughts emerge, we will not interrupt. Not to correct, argue, direct, or even agree. Then, the resulting safety is so calming that it starts neurons firing in ways we could never have imagined!

As people begin to feel safer around us, their thinking noticeably improves. Our teams and clients (or Partners and children!) begin to trust us more with their thoughts, feelings, worries and ideas. Trusting that they can be courageous with their own thinking. Because whatever they think, we will not judge or interrupt them. We will simply pay attention.

Equality

Regarding each other as thinking peers giving equal time to think.



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Most of us have an instinct to help. To solve the problems that are brought to us by our kids, our Partners, friends, or those we work with. We just want to help. It somehow makes us feel more worthwhile, more valuable, if we can solve other people's problems for them.

And when we are on the other side of the fence, we can crave it. The security of someone else telling us what to do. Perhaps giving us permission to do something that we are unsure of. Even having the excuse of hiding behind someone else's idea- far less risky if it goes wrong.

It can feel safe when someone else, especially someone higher up the pecking order, does the thinking for us.

But I've begun to see that safety as an illusion. That I don't feel *truly* safe when someone else is thinking for me. Not safe enough to truly be my authentic, whole self. Not safe enough to have real confidence in my own thinking. Certainly not safe enough to think independently at my best.

I have noticed that in the presence of someone who asserts that they know better than me, that their experience makes them somehow superior to me, I begin to trust myself less. In certain cases, over years, I have found it eroding my self-esteem, even my sense of who I really am.

When a boss or a colleague takes up all the airtime in a meeting because what they have to say is just SO important. We can start to wonder if they're right. If what we have to say doesn't really matter anyway.

I recently read that in most meetings 30% of people do 90% of the talking. Worryingly, that pattern tends to persist (i.e., the same 30% of people contribute the most, consistently across all of their meetings).

So, what about the other 70%? What about their thinking? **Does it matter less?**

When we are not treated as equal, able to think about and solve things for ourselves, does our thinking become limited? Do we start to lose confidence, even our sense of self? Simply because we have not been allowed to think of ourselves as able to come up with our own ideas.

It is still a radical and courageous act, to genuinely think for ourselves. In a world where conformity, normality, and fitting in are so highly valued. We need to believe ourselves truly equal in our ability to think for ourselves, to act with that courage.

And from the other side, how can we build that courage in those around us? How can we begin to really believe in the equality of others, who are perhaps less experienced or less qualified than us, to be able to think? Can we step back, trust, and believe that we don't always need to have all the answers? It's tough!

What happens when as leaders, we take that approach? When we start assuming that everyone on our team is equal to us in their ability to think. Does it somehow make us less important if we are not the solver, the innovator, the helper? Does it make those around us feel less confident in us, or less safe and secure if we are more vulnerable and open?

I don't think so. When I, and other leaders I have worked with have taken this approach I have repeatedly seen the opposite to be true.

When we ask questions because we are genuinely interested in the answers, when we listen and make sure that everyone else speaks more than we do, we become **more** important not less. More important than we were when we (supposedly) had all the answers.

This belief in equality builds self-esteem, encourages new thoughts to emerge, and supports genuine collaboration and innovation.

It begins to create safety of a totally different kind. Safety to explore new ideas, to innovate, and to really challenge old established ways of thinking. The safety for those around us to start to be their authentic, whole selves.



Ease

Discarding internal
urgency.

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What happens to you when you are put under pressure to answer a question that you weren't prepared for?

Some people seem to love it. Having "the gift of the gab" is what my Nanny used to call it. The ability to blag, think on your feet, and come up with an answer. And a convincing one at that.

Often, we seem to find those people in sales roles. Perhaps the natural entrepreneurs who have risen to lead their businesses.

In many ways I'm super jealous of those people. And I am *definitely* not one of them.

Put *me* on the spot, especially under pressure, and I struggle. My heart starts to beat faster, my face gets hot, a knot appears in my stomach and my shoulders start to rise. And that's adrenaline. The hormone which rises in us when we feel threatened or unsafe. The hormone that drives our fight, flight or freeze response.

Our bodies are wired to keep us physically safe from threat for the next 10 seconds. Super useful if the threat is a sabre-toothed tiger and we need to run like hell. But in today's world, how often is there a sabre tooth lurking?

The threats we face today are more likely to be a demanding boss or teammate, perhaps a problem that we think might be beyond us, or perhaps that call from our kids' school....

But our brains respond in the same way. Our Amygdala perceives threat and kicks in. Adrenaline rises, readying us to fly fight or freeze our way out of danger. And this response can cloud our thinking, reduce clarity. Cause the fighters to fight, and the rest of us to want to run away or feel like a deer caught in headlights.

Regularly through my career, I have found myself in situations that have triggered this response in me. And I am certain I have triggered that response in others.

So how do we stop? How instead can we create the safety that comes from a sense of Ease in our meetings, and in all our interactions? A freedom from urgency, pressure, and rush when we are thinking together. How in turn, does that make our teams feel safer, more trusting, and ultimately, better able to think independently and collaborate at their very

best? And how can we possibly afford to make the time for all of that, when our diaries are under so much pressure already?

My learning about ease, and experience of the Thinking Environment have given me a different perspective. That creating the ease for others to think clearly in our presence, uninterrupted, saves a huge amount of time.

Give that person, or that team, one single challenging question to really consider deeply, and watch them achieve far more in less time than a tightly packed agenda ever could?

And more than that, I have seen that by demonstrating ease in my own demeanour, it can stop the feeling of pressure that causes adrenaline to rise in myself and others. And instead, everyone feels safe and calm.

And from that safe, calm, easeful place, once again, the genius begins to emerge. The sparks of ideas fly. Clarity emerges, and you find that you've got to the root of the problem that you've struggled to fix for months.

And then, with the real issue uncovered, the answers that you get surpass everyone's expectations.

Can adopting an intention to remain easeful really achieve all of that?

Well, Einstein famously said:

"If I had an hour to solve a problem, and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask... for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes."

No rush there then! Create ease, create safety to deeply think, and the genius follows.

Einstein said so, and he was pretty smart!



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Appreciation

Noticing what is good and saying it.

We all go around wondering, don't we?

Trying to be good, kind, clever, insightful, helpful, loving. And wondering whether it's working. How are we seen by others? Are we appreciated?

When others recognise us those parts of us that make a difference to their lives, AND they say it, out loud. We don't have to wonder any more. And it feels good. Makes us feel more secure - safe in the knowledge that we are seen and valued.

Appreciation is powerful, and when working to build trust and safety, with an individual or in a team, it's an important skill to develop.

We human beings like to think of ourselves as logical creatures, able to clearly think our way through anything that life chucks our way. But it's just not true. We rely on our feelings and instincts as information, just as much as we rely on what we read on a page, or the words that we hear.

Our bodies deliver around 11 million bits of information to our brains, every single second. As a comparison, we can only cognitively process at a rate of about 60 bits per second (according to Britannia.com/science). Our brains are instinctively processing all the rest!

We evolved to rely on our instincts to survive. And a major element of that, is our emotional radar. But when that radar is so exquisitely attuned to danger, in today's world, it means we can perceive it everywhere! Especially when we feel less than sure of ourselves.

And that's where appreciation comes in.

Research carried out by the Gottman institute showed that to really build real connection, a real sense of safety, there needs to be a ratio of at least 5:1 Appreciation to Criticism. Some research suggests the ratio is even higher.

Appreciation of the positive then, needs to be a deliberate and positive choice. And when it is, it can be powerful. When teams appreciate and Trust each other, they become more generous when interpreting each other's actions. And how much kinder an environment it is, when everyone applies the most positive interpretation to others' actions, rather than the most negative!

We recently held a team session on feedback. One observation seemed to hold true for everyone.

If I trust that you value me, and you have my back, then I can more easily hear your constructive feedback and use it to grow.

So, the more we can appreciate each other, the more secure we feel as individuals.

And ultimately, the safer we feel, the better we think.

In all aspects of our lives, I think we should consider whether we are appreciating enough.

I know it sounds like it could turn into a bit of a hippy "love in", but we need to get over the embarrassment of being overtly appreciative and try it! I've honestly watched it build safety,

when our team have regularly, deliberately, remembered and then reminded each other how much we are all valued and appreciated.

And when we do have to deliver constructive feedback, the groundwork has been done. There is no question that it is coming from the right place. And there is no need for the recipient to feel threatened or not good enough. Because they already know that they are appreciated, there's just always room to grow!



Feelings

Welcoming the release of emotion.

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About 18 months ago, I lost my Grandad. He was nearly 90 and it was expected, but I was no less sad for that. He was my Grandad Reg, and I loved him very much.

When I heard this news, I was staying away from home on a training course. I considered leaving and coming home, but having thought about it, there didn't seem much point. There was nothing I could do at home, and so I decided to stay.

Luckily for me, the training course was a Time to Think coaching course, led by Nancy Kline.

I very clearly remember walking into the room that morning. One of my colleagues had already let Nancy know for me. She gave me a great big hug. I cried, and that was fine. I didn't feel I needed to apologise, and there was not even a hint of my sadness making anyone else uncomfortable. Having let out those tears, I could sit with my sadness *and* engage fully with the day.

It struck me very clearly then what psychological safety truly means. The difference that our own and other peoples' acceptance of our feelings can make.

We did a lot of thinking that day, as you might expect on a Thinking Environment coaching course! And what was incredible to me, was how clear my thinking was.

Grief can do that of course. Clear away all the un-important stuff, leaving behind a real clarity as to what really matters. But, so can the simple ability to express what we feel, free of embarrassment, judgement, or awkwardness.

By creating an environment for ourselves and others, where feelings are just accepted as normal, we create real safety. There is no need to feel the need to apologise when we cry, or to hide our anxieties, or even to suppress a fit of the giggles for that matter! We're human beings, emotional creatures. It's how we evolved!

Mindful practice teaches us to simply observe and accept our feelings for what they are, without judgement. I have seen the Thinking Environment supporting that, allowing feelings to arise, be felt, and subside again, in order to restore our ability to think clearly. And it works.

If I had sat there on that day trying not to cry, trying somehow to hide how I felt, to keep that ridiculous concept of a "stiff upper lip", there is no way I could even have listened properly to what Nancy was teaching. Let alone had any kind of coherent thoughts about it, or expressed those, and done something with them. Yet I did, and with incredible clarity.

Feelings can be an overlooked component sometimes, certainly an uncomfortable one for many people. But to create a space in which our feelings are entirely and completely acceptable creates an incredible safety within which we can truly be our whole selves.



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Encouragement

Giving courage to go to the unexplored edge of our thinking by ceasing competition as Thinkers.

We're all hard wired to win. Genetically I mean. We evolved to compete. For resources, a mate, the right to sleep in the safest cave, the richest pickings when foraging.

Now that we don't have to compete any more to physically stay alive and thrive, this drive has been redirected. In many cases it comes out in healthy ways of course (competitive sport being the obvious example). But we also compete in conversation. To be the one who has the best idea, or is the most right, perhaps to win an argument, to be the cleverest, the funniest, the most well liked.

There's still probably competition to win a mate at play (just check out your local dodgy late opening pub on a Friday night to see that) but otherwise, things have moved on.

So, in this modern world of competition, *how safe do we feel with each other?*

If we are talking, and you get a sense that it is more important for me to be right than it is for us to actually get at what is true, will you feel safe to tell me what you really think? Especially if you realise that what you think is contrary to what I think. Even more especially if I have any kind of power over you.

If you sense that by opening up and sharing how you really feel, or what you truly think, that I could ridicule you, put you down, or even use what you say against you in the future. Will you feel safe?

I am fairly sure that as you read this, you will be able to think of a time where you have been inside an interaction where it has felt this way. I am equally sure that it would have made you feel a bit less safe to express your true thoughts and feelings with that person in the future. And if that becomes a repeating pattern, well then, we are in real trouble. Especially as Leaders, unless of course we want a team of "Yes" people and a culture where groupthink prevails.

Imagine the power we can unlock instead if we create true safety for people to really think as and for themselves and express all of their views. To create the safety within which we could all move from wanting to be right, to wanting to get it right, together.

I recently read a great quote from James Clear in his book "Atomic Habits"

"A strategy for thinking clearly:

Rather than trying to be right, assume you are wrong and try to be less wrong.

Trying to be right, has a tendency to devolve into protecting your beliefs. Trying to be less wrong, has a tendency to prompt more questions and intellectual humility."

If we can enter more situations with this in mind, we start to move away from this internal competition.

We move towards the behaviours which create the Thinking Environment component of encouragement.

Encouragement to go to the cutting edge of our Thinking. Free from any internal competition.

And that creates safety for those around us. For others to think as themselves, and for themselves, at their best.

Information

Supplying facts,
recognising social
context, dismantling
denial.



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I read Brené Brown's Leadership book, Dare to Lead, a couple of years ago (and a couple more times since). It is one of the best, certainly the most practical Leadership book that I have read (yet) and highly recommend it.

One of the many stand out takeaways for me, was her phrase:

"Clear is Kind. Unclear is Unkind."

When I first read it, I could immediately see how it could apply when we are giving feedback. I know there are many occasions when I have given woolly unspecific feedback with the hope that I am saving others' feelings. We think we are being kinder by skirting around something.

In fact, Brown points out that we're really just protecting ourselves from an uncomfortable conversation, and not being kind at all. This approach gives little to no chance of the recipient of your poor feedback really understanding the issues and improving. We've been unclear about our expectations and perhaps how they are not being met. That is unkind. I could see that. It made total sense.

It was also quite an uncomfortable read, but I'm working on that!

Recently though I have been considering just how widely this concept applies. And how it might link to the component of Information in a Thinking environment.

If we do not have the information that we need, to be fully informed, we cannot think clearly and effectively.

Even more than that though particularly in a period of significant change, if we do not feel well informed, I think it can make us feel uncertain. Maybe even unsafe.

As leaders we often despair about office gossip, the misinformation that it spreads, and the fall out that is created. But when a decision is pending that will affect you and it's out of your hands, it is unsettling, even frightening. Especially when you sense that information is

being hidden or withheld. Looking at it that way, why would you not seek comfort in discussing your uncertainties with colleagues in the same boat.

From that perspective, as I see it anyway, there is plenty that we can do to head this one off at the pass. If we can keep our teams better informed, they will feel safer and more secure. That means less gossip, meaning less time-consuming fall out.

We can often think that it is safer for our teams not to know, for us to protect in some way from what is going on.

But if we have recruited well, I think that we should assume that we have astute people around us who will be noticing and connecting the dots. That people are guessing more than we usually give them credit for, and then often worrying based on their deductions.

So, I've come to believe that clear is kind here too. Even when we do not have a full picture ourselves, or there is privileged information that we cannot share for now, we should always work to inform as well as we can, and as clearly as we can. To anticipate the anxiety and share information that could reduce it. To acknowledge the feelings of our teams, particularly in times of change. To be clear, and to manage expectations.

In creating a psychologically safe environment within which people can think at their best, providing full and clear information, is a kindness that we cannot afford to ignore.

Difference

Championing our
inherent diversity of
identity and thought.



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What is diversity anyway? We talk about it a lot. Diversity of race, gender, experience, and personality.

In the context of creating an environment within which we think independently, as and for ourselves, I think Diversity simply means feeling safe to bring our whole selves with all of our inherent difference, unapologetically into the room.

And to me, our "whole selves" means all the diverse knowledge, perspectives, feelings, and ideas, that come from whatever our individual lives have equipped us with. And those individual lives are a culmination of all that our backgrounds, personalities, perspectives, and experiences have equipped us with.

When we listen to ignite the Thinking of others, as we do within a Thinking Environment, then we don't need to be threatened or challenged by diverse opinions, ideas, or views. Instead, we can hear them as information. And we can use that to inform our own thoughts, broaden our perspectives, and imbue our own Thinking with greater diversity.

When we do listen in that way, we can be genuinely fascinated with the Thinking of the other, no matter how their thinking interacts with our own background and established beliefs. And the person we are listening to can feel safe to bring their *whole* self into the room.

I think this might be what I see as the ultimate potential of the Thinking Environment. The possibility that in our terribly divided and divisive world, perhaps this way of listening could open our hearts and minds to the wonderful diversity that exists. Perhaps it gives us the tool that we need to really work together as one single species, custodians of our beautiful planet.

Just imagine the potential if everyone in the world felt that safe to think as themselves.

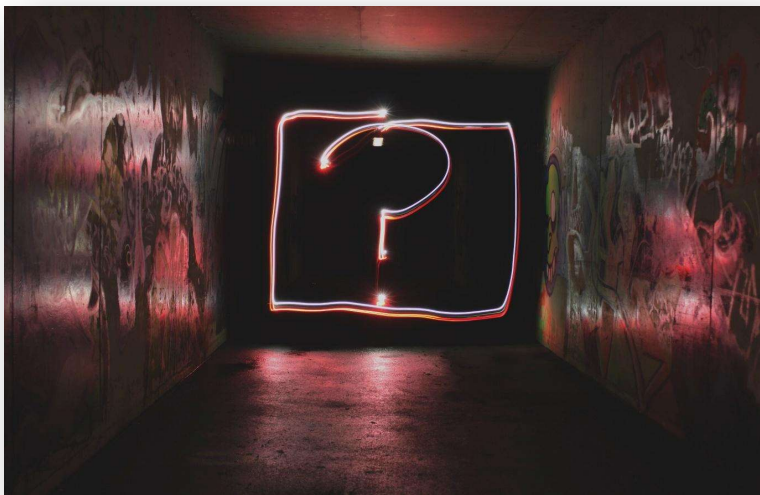


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Incisive Questions

Freeing the human mind of an untrue limiting assumption lived as true.

At the heart of everything that we perceive, are assumptions. When we sit on a chair, we have learned to assume that the chair will support our weight. When we send someone an email, we have learned to assume that they will receive it and reply.

Most assumptions are helpful. They are how we learn. They help us to make sense of all the electrical impulses that arrive in our brains, shaping them into our perceptions of the world. There is a wonderful [TED talk by Anil Seth](#), called "Your Brain Hallucinates your Conscious Reality" that explains this really well.

But what about the assumptions that hold us back? That have crept into our consciousness based on past experiences, and become untrue assumptions about ourselves or the world?

"We've always done it like that, so we assumed it was the only way", "Our clients prefer it that way" (based on conversations five years ago with a couple of clients), "I'm not creative" (based on a particular school report from an art teacher who we didn't really get on with).

We want to remove those kinds of assumptions, right? To stop them limiting our thinking, being stuck in a rut and resistant to change. But how can we challenge these assumptions, when often we have accepted them not as assumptions but as beliefs, even truths, on which we base our thinking?

Let's take the "my clients prefer" example.

If I say to you "Your clients don't prefer it that way, it's all in your head", you will feel challenged. I'm threatening what you hold to be true. And sometimes those "truths" are held at a very fundamental level. Your amygdala will go haywire, and you will no longer feel safe thinking with me.

Our minds don't like to obey! So, if I *tell* you to change your mind, you're not going to respond well. More than likely, you will find me threatening, and shut me down, defending your point of view. Your critical thinking will be overtaken by your emotional, instinctive, threat response.

What if instead, I frame it differently? Give you something for your mind to play with. A hypothetical construct that you can simply, safely explore.

You ARE assuming that you know what your clients prefer (unless you can provide me with clear and recent evidence to the contrary). You don't KNOW it to be true. We can use that to instead ask:

"If you knew that your clients might prefer things a different way, how would you go about redesigning your service?"

That feels much safer. I'm not telling you to think something different, simply inviting you to play with the idea that an alternative assumption could yield more creative thinking.

And from there.... anything could happen!

That is the inherent safety that an incisive question provides.

Place

Providing a physical environment – the room, the listener, your body – that says, “You matter”.



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I finished a particularly emotionally tough day recently and sat on my bed while my Partner put our youngest child in the bath. Sitting there listening to them playing, having nothing to do and nowhere to be in that moment, felt safe. Finally, I could relax.

It made me feel incredibly grateful. I cannot imagine not having a safe place to be. A safe home to come back to at the end of the day.

And reflecting afterwards I realised something. That safety brings me clarity. Sitting there I thought about my day, noticed the anxious thoughts that were circulating about whether I had done and said the right things. Gradually I relaxed. I started to think more clearly. I reflected on the good work I had undoubtedly done that day. The support I had given to someone who really needed it, the encouragement and perspective I had provided to someone else. Gradually the reality of the day emerged from that place, and I felt calmer.

In my safe place my thinking was clearer. My feelings were clearer.

Just imagine trying to solve a complex problem standing on the hard shoulder of the M1 with cars and lorries whizzing past at 70 miles per hour.

Then imagine trying to solve that same problem in your safe place. Sitting on your bed, or at the end of your garden, wherever you can relax and be yourself.

So different, right?

And that is why Place matters so profoundly.

On the M1 our mind is preoccupied with rushing cars, danger, keeping us safe from harm. We cannot possibly expect to think clearly.

When our mind is occupied keeping us safe from harm, that's much of our processing power already accounted for.

So, when we create safety in the physical and emotional space that we hold for others, it frees up all that power. When people feel safe in our “place” be it the physical space in which we invite them to think with us, or in fact the “place” that is created by our presence and attention, then the sparks start to fly, and we can just sit back and watch the magic happen.

As our world moved online in 2020, it has been fascinating to think more about how we can create this place of safety in a virtual world.

We can of course make what others see welcoming places, and not use virtual backgrounds (where I assure you that the distraction of your head disappearing when you move too quickly is far worse than being able to see a bit of homely clutter in the background!).

But it seems to me that when others are with us, our faces, demeanour, and body language (whatever we can express from the chest up on Zoom anyway) become a huge component of the place within which they think. So those things matter. Very much.

Most of us by now have probably had the experience of someone reading their emails while they are supposed to be listening to us on Zoom. Eyes darting back and forth, or a face lighting up as a new window is opened perhaps. I certainly have, and every time it has caused my ability to think to immediately deteriorate.

I start to wonder” am I not interesting enough for you? Are your emails more important than what I’m saying?..... **Do I not matter?”.**

What has been wonderful to see though, is how effectively we can create a place online, which says to those we are with “you really do matter”.

I can’t say for sure, of course, that the new coaching clients, or the delegates on my online courses have felt as safe in my “Virtual Place” as they would have done if we were together in person. But the results have still been stunning!

And when I have been online with someone offering me their full and generative attention, focused on me and nowhere else, I know that I’ve felt safe to go to the cutting edge of my own thinking. I’ve done some of my best thinking in online thinking sessions. I’ve watched teams reach amazing places on Zoom when the place that they have held for each other has said “everyone matters here”.

It’s vital that we remember how astute we are as human beings. If someone is *really* listening to us, we just know. We pick up the speed and sincerity of their response. We notice the micro-movements in their face as they involuntarily respond to what we just said.

If we just remember that when someone is thinking with us, **WE** become their safe place, then perhaps we can more intentionally maintain that for them. Intentionally stop those behaviours that indicate “you don’t matter” and replace them with the kind of respectful attention that says exactly the opposite.

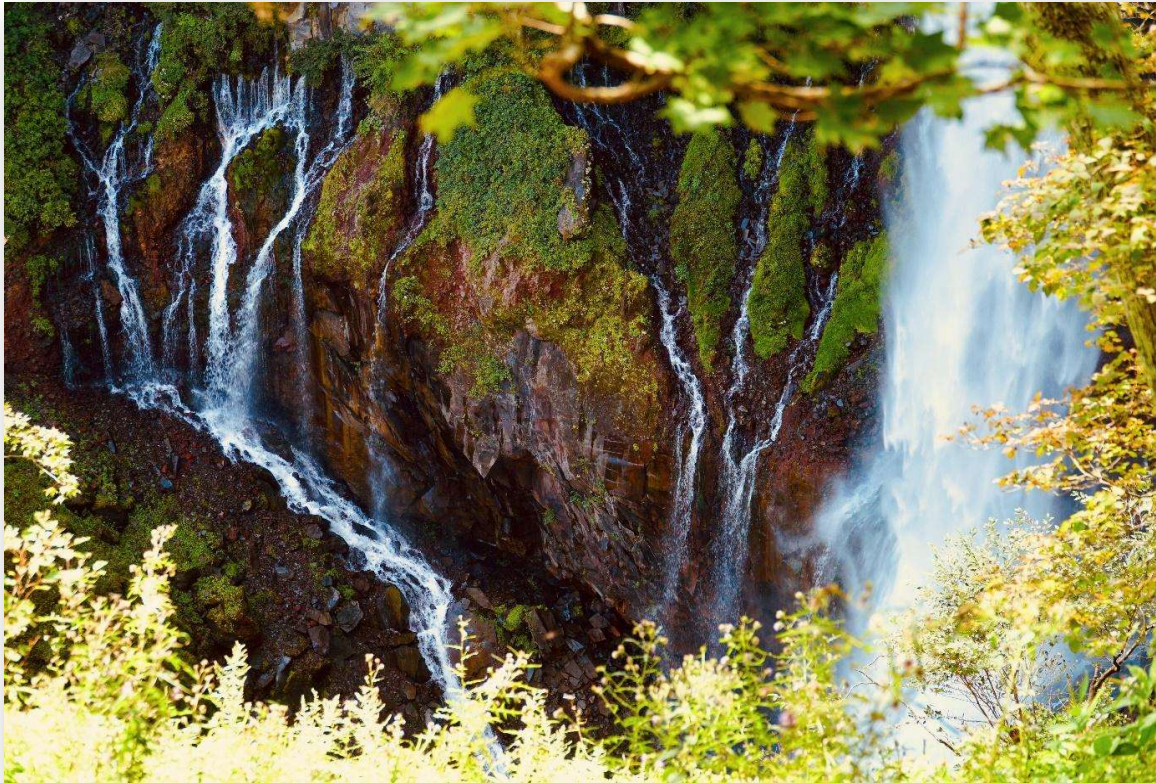


Photo by [P.T](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Over the last few years, I have watched as we have embraced the Thinking Environment within our Organisation. Slowly but surely, it has become the way that we do things. And as it has, I have seen the quality of relationships improve, safety increase, and people become more and more able to be themselves.

I have quietly observed people come out of their shells who used to assume that their thinking was not worth sharing. I’ve watched as people have gradually become more comfortable challenging established thinking and uncovering the things that we do badly. Better still, I have watched ideas blossom and thinking thrive.

I’m continuing to observe a shift towards greater accountability, combined with a greater responsibility taken by everyone to come up with solutions to their own problems.

All of this, I believe, because everyone feels far safer to think for themselves and as themselves than they used to. The Thinking Environment, and consistent application of the Ten Components, has been the foundational system that has underpinned this.

I think sometimes that Thinking Environment ideas can feel a bit fluffy when people first hear them. A “nice to have, if we have some spare time” in organisations. I am coming to

see this way of being, the principles *and* practices, as an incredibly practical way to build the foundations needed for any team to thrive and perform. Nothing fluffy about that!

I observe time and time again, when I am in a Thinking Environment, how safe I feel. As comfortable to be as open with virtual strangers as I am with close friends. Even more so in some cases.

I hope I have illustrated above, how increasing the presence of any one of the Ten Components will improve the level of safety in our relationships, whether personal or professional. If we can skilfully master the ability to hold all ten for those we are with then, over time, we can really build Trust and increase safety exponentially.

In turn, we can ignite the Thinking of all of those around us.

Just imagine the potential!

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when we think
great actions begin with great thinking