Beyond 20 Seconds:
The Independent Mind Of The Board

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What would happen if instead of being interrupted the speaker were encouraged to go beyond 20 seconds, think freely and independently, liberated from the need to say the first thing that comes into their heads because they know they are unlikely to get the chance to think further than 20 seconds will allow?

We are directing public and private sector organisations in a very changed world in the 21st century, using resources faster than nature can regenerate them and against a backdrop of ever- greater transparency. One of the biggest challenges we face is denial – failing, or being unwilling, to see what is in front us. And yet, here at the early part of the 21st century, perhaps we are reaching a tipping point in our understanding and willingness to take responsibility for our actions. In her widely acclaimed book, 'Wilful Blindness'[1], Margaret Heffernan has explored in depth the unwillingness to admit to ourselves or colleagues the problems in plain sight that can ruin relationships, bring down corporations and contribute to global catastrophe such as climate change; at a recent event to promote Integrated Reporting, Mark Carney, the Governor of the Bank of England, spoke about the 'Tragedy of Horizons', acknowledging the failure of the business community and investors to think beyond the short term; in reporting arrangements, the International <IR> Framework, released in December 2013, is now gaining global momentum with more organisations signing up to and beginning to speak the language of sustainable business. And in 2015, Pope Francis will be addressing the UN in Paris on climate change and its devastating effects.

But these changes taking place at a macro level need to be reflected at the micro level too, of individual habits and intentional behaviours that make up what happens in the boardroom. A plethora of reports have highlighted the failures in corporate leadership that contributed heavily to the global financial crisis. These include:

- dominant personalities or groups
- inappropriate allocation of time to matters requiring discussion or debate
- lack of preparation in advance of the meeting
- an unhelpful manner of presenting information to the board and fear.

In this article we consider the conditions that are needed to create environments which generate fresh, independent thinking where people are free to think with rigour, imagination, courage and grace and commend the application of the Thinking Environment methodology, pioneered by Nancy Kline[2], because today, in 2015, thinking for yourself is still a radical act.

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[1] Heffernan *Wilful Blindness* (Walker & Company 2011).

[2] Kline *Time to Think: Listening to ignite the human mind (Cassell 1999)*.

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Beyond 20 Seconds: The Independent Mind of the Board
Originally Published: The Corporate Report, pp 11 – 15 (2015 II)
Page 1 of 5

A 2012 report by the Good Governance Forum[3] stated that the difference between good boards and great boards was the quality of their conversations. Action at board level, they said, is essentially thinking and conversation is thinking out loud at the highest level of the enterprise. Yet, in most interactions, when asked for an opinion, a thinker typically speaks for 20 seconds before they are interrupted, their thinking and ideas stopped in mid flow, limiting their contribution. What would happen if instead of being interrupted the speaker were encouraged to go beyond 20 seconds, think freely and independently, liberated from the need to say the first thing that comes into their heads because they know they are unlikely to get the chance to think further than 20 seconds will allow? What if, instead of listening to comment, correct or impress, board members listened to ignite? This is the promise of the Thinking Environment.

How did we get here?

Fear of being on the outside, rather than part of the 'in- group' means the one thing young people are afraid to do is think for themselves. Doing what everyone else does, thinking what everyone else thinks keeps him or her 'safe', popular and maintains the status quo. Later, around the boardroom table, when the going gets tough the result is narrow, short-term thinking; a focus on outputs not outcomes, conformance not performance and at worst catastrophic corporate failure. In research by Cass Business School for Airmic[4] 18 high profile corporate crises were investigated. The report found that a number of underlying risks identified predisposed organisations to, or were examples of, groupthink.

Exchange and Independent Thinking[5]

Kline has introduced the metaphor of Two Worlds of Thinking – Exchange and Independent Thinking. An example of exchange thinking is the journeyman lawyer who listens just long enough to diagnose the problem based on their knowledge of case study, precedent, the known, the complete, and the solid. Gaps are filled, conclusions reached and advice given without ever hearing the client's full story. And whilst the client will go away with an answer – it may not be one they are entirely satisfied with, as they do not 'feel listened to'. This reflects a transactional approach that typifies exchange thinking where hierarchy dictates the flow of conversation. Yet ironically it is often the lawyer's need to impress the client that limits their effectiveness. By contrast, those lawyers who go on to be truly successful listen with palpable interest to their client, approach the meeting as one of equals with respect being at the heart of the relationship. At the boardroom however, exchange thinking is still often typical with ego, hierarchy and competition driving the discussion. At worst it includes interruption, tailgating, distraction and rush. It produces adrenaline and can be creative and exciting but is also dull and damaging, blunting the cutting edge of thinking. In contrast, Independent Thinking requires diversity of thinking, keen awareness of equality of turn, generative quality of attention and agreement of no interruption. A good Chair and leader recognises the importance of cultivating such a culture of respect as, to quote Peter Drucker, 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast'.

Creating a Thinking Environment

The ten components that Kline says are needed for thinking to flourish are: Attention, Equality, Ease, Diversity, Encouragement, Feelings, Information, Incisive Questions, Place and Appreciation. Together they create environments

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[3] 'Improving Boardroom Conversations', Tomorrow's Company, 2012

[4] Cass Business School on behalf of Airmic, Roads to Ruin – A Study of Major Risk Events: Their Origins, Impacts and Implications, London, (Airmic 2012).

[5] Kline 'Two Worlds of Independent Thinking', 2013

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Beyond 20 Seconds: The Independent Mind of the Board
Originally Published: The Corporate Report, pp 11 – 15 (2015 II)
Page 2 of 5

where people can and will think for themselves. Research has shown[6] that such environments generate greater participation and inclusion, the surfacing of better ideas, solutions and decisions, speedier resolution of issues and greater structure and rigour including better preparation. Importantly, they focus on the collective rather than individual agendas resulting in a move away from the pernicious silos that can stunt organisations. The Thinking Environment generates the Integrated Thinking that is the starting point for the Integrated Reporting that is now being adopted by forward-thinking boards. The rest of this paper shares what a Board Meeting incorporating the Ten Components might look like.

Applying the Thinking Environment

- ### *Applying the Thinking Environment*

The Airmic study showed that one of the contributory causes of boardroom failure was a poor agenda and failure by board members to prepare properly. In a thinking environment it is recognised that the mind works better in the presence of a question, so those tasked with setting the agenda will prepare it in the form of questions by working out the outcome needed on each item. For example: Do we need a decision or new ideas? Do we need to discover the implications of earlier decisions? Do we need to say how we feel or consider new information? Whatever the desired outcome, a question will drive the meeting there. Board members preparing for the meeting will find their minds responding to a question rather than reading a bold statement that doesn't provoke interest.

- ### *Information, dismantling denial and place*

In preparing for the meeting, all relevant *Information* required is gathered, as it is vital to supply the facts that will enable decisions to be made. As discussed earlier, one of the great failings of business and investors is the inability to face what is in front of them and yet doing so will lead to better thinking and decision-making. For example, recognising now rather than denying a poor financial position requiring redundancies and downsizing will mean decisions can be made that will forestall greater failure later. A powerful question designed to dismantle denial is, 'What will we discover in a year's time that we know now?'. The venue for the meeting is discussed and agreed as it is recognised that *Place*, the physical environment, has an impact on how well the board members will think.

- ### *Starting the Meeting*

At the beginning of the meeting the Chairman will invite each member in turn to report succinctly on achievements since they last met. Speaking in a round where everyone has a turn means equality without hierarchy and without interruption which in turn creates *Ease* defined here as freedom from urgency and rush. By starting the meeting on a positive note the Chairman is going against the grain and to many this may seem naive and 'soft'. Yet it takes courage for a leader to challenge the received orthodoxy as to how to run a meeting. At Tesco, the embattled UK supermarket chain, the boardroom cannot be an easy place. However, to focus only on the negative press, the disastrous figures and concerns of shareholders is to ignore the hard work and commitment of the staff who daily face customers on the shop floor. Reality is both negative and positive and those willing to start the meeting this way will find that recognition of what is going well will create a shared sense of purpose, be motivating thereby contributing to the safety necessary to think well about the tough issues.

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[6] Havers 'Transforming Meetings: The Benefits of a Thinking Environment', 2011

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Beyond 20 Seconds: The Independent Mind of the Board
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Page 3 of 5

- *The first Agenda Item*

When the Round is completed the Chairman will present the first Agenda topic. As discussed this is in the form of a question. Instead of 'Quarterly sales forecast' the item is driven by the outcome they're looking for and instead reads: 'How can we increase revenues by 5% in the next quarter?'.

Another Round follows, without interruption and with the promise of discussion to follow.

Once everyone has spoken, the Chairman draws them back together and free discussion then takes place on the points raised. This happens without interruption, each giving respectful *Attention* and waiting until the other has made their point before giving theirs – in other words, not cutting across, invalidating or sabotaging, however innocently, another's train of thought.

The Thinking Environment involves *Equality*, respect for *Diversity* and *Encourages* those who are often quietest to come forward as it is not only the fastest or loudest who have the best ideas. Another Round follows to summarise what has been discussed. If the group is larger than eight, it is split into two smaller groups so that the Rounds happen in less time and everyone still gets to speak.

- *The meeting continues*

The meeting continues in this way with the next Agenda Item/Questions, a Round to capture everyone's thinking, a discussion without interruption, and a Round to summarise what has been discussed. This process implies willingness to dialogue, appreciation for and openness to hearing other points of view.

- *Incisive Questions*

A Chair experienced in the Thinking Environment will be listening for limiting assumptions that are blocking goals and outcomes. For example: 'We cannot grow the business because one of our key sources of funding is going to dry up'. The Chairman will find a liberating alternative around which he can frame an *Incisive Question*. For example: 'If we knew that this business was attractive to a range of investors who would want to work with us to grow the business, what would be our next step?'.

- *Feelings*

In this scenario, the agenda item relating to possible downsizing and staff redundancies might provoke strong *feelings* in those present. The reality of this must be expressed so that people can think freely and energy that would otherwise go into suppressing emotions and generating mistrust can instead be put into authentic conversations that generate better outcomes for all.

- *Items requiring new ideas and innovation*

For some Agenda items the board is seeking fresh ideas and innovation. In this case, the Chairman will put the participants into Thinking Pairs where they will each have 5 minutes of uninterrupted thinking time on a question with the listener giving quality Attention that demonstrates genuine interest. Whilst some may find this uncomfortable, by contrast in most meetings only those who have an interest in the agenda item are engaged, with others rehearsing what they will say when 'their' agenda item is discussed. With a 5-minute Thinking Pair the thinking on each topic has grown exponentially and having everyone think about an issue generates integrated thinking rather than silos.

- *Closing the meeting*

At the end of the Agenda items the Chairman will summarise the decisions that have been made and ask if there are any issues to be considered another time. In a final Round, he asks each person to comment succinctly on what they feel has been achieved and invite them to express

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Page 4 of 5

genuine *Appreciation* for their colleagues and one or more aspects of the meeting.

Conclusion

The Thinking Environment approach overcomes many of the negative aspects of boardroom behaviour that have contributed to corporate failures in the last two decades. It takes us beyond the 20 seconds of thinking that is our usual experience of exchange thinking and into the realm of fresh ideas found in the world of independent thinking. With the advances in neuroscience supporting the Thinking Environment approach it is an idea whose time has come and is an example of the 21st century thinking we need if we are to solve the problems our 20th century mindset has created.

Mitzi Wyman is a Solicitor by background with wide ranging experience across health, law and media. She now specialises in leadership and organisational development consulting and leads on the NHS's participation in the IIRC Integrated Reporting pilot. She has a particular interest in governance and how integrated thinking and integrated reporting can lead to better outcomes for organisations and society at large. She is currently producing a documentary on 'Corporate Social Responsibility, from compassion not judgment' which is to be premiered in 2015. Mitzi has an LLM in International Environmental Law, an MSc in Organisational Psychology and has trained with Nancy Kline, creator of the Thinking Environment methodology.

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