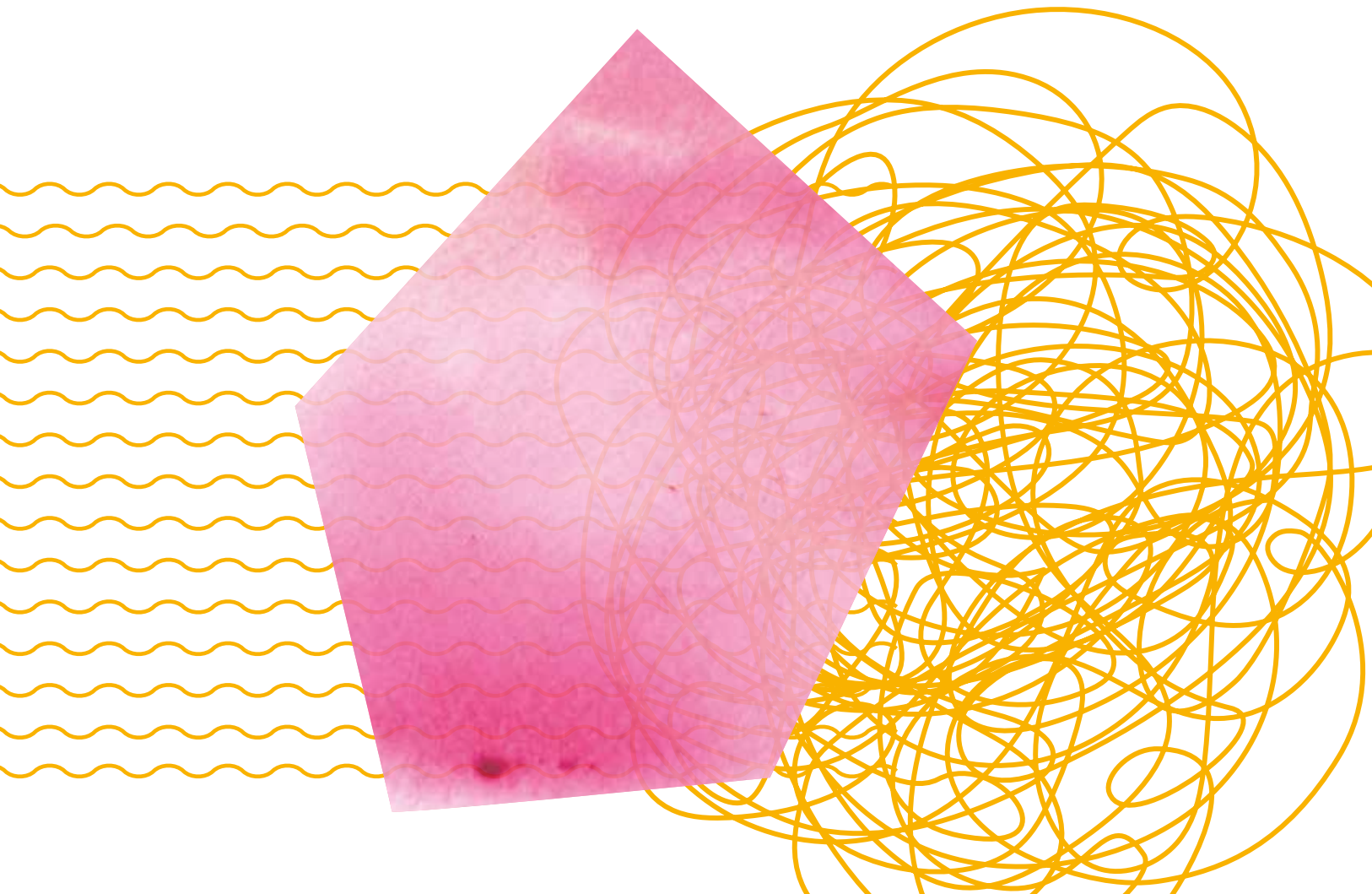
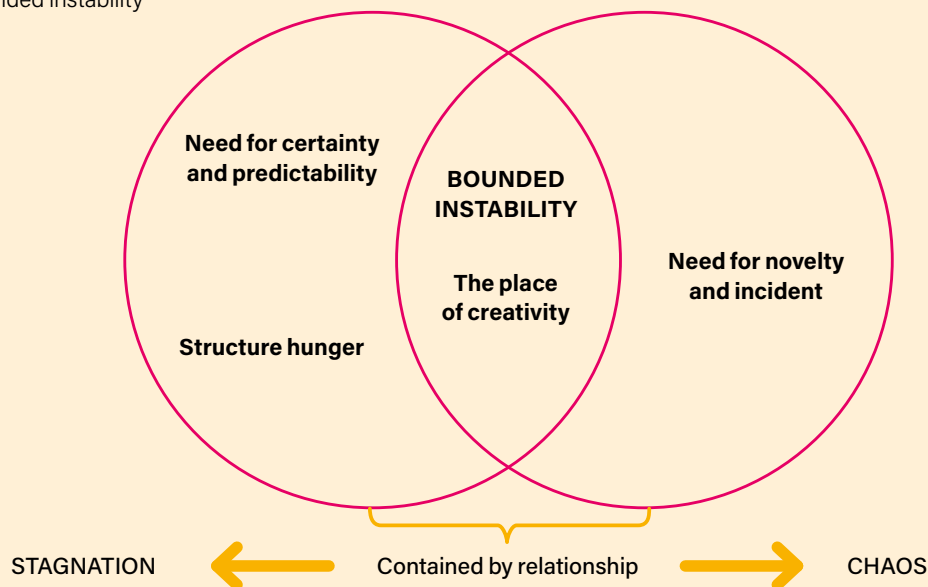


# The place of creativity:

bounded instability and  
the Thinking Environment<sup>®</sup>

**Carolyn Mumby** explores the concept of bounded instability in the context of Nancy Kline's Thinking Environment<sup>®</sup> and explains how it relates to this and other theories



**Figure 1** Bounded instability

©Charlotte Sills 2016. Based on Stacey's theory, 1996. Reproduced with permission.

**T**here are certain moments in life when a theory illuminates and deepens the potential for exploration where previously there was tension or impasse. For me, hearing of 'bounded instability' in 2016 was such a moment. This concept describes the potentially creative relationship between established structures and the not-knowing of innovation. If we stick rigidly to established structures, we stagnate; if we move away completely from all structure, we spin out into chaos. Where the two aspects in the system intersect is the place of creativity. I have found that the insight generated from this lens has rich application in my work with individual leaders, supervisees and organisations.

### The legitimate system and the shadow system

Lecturer, author, psychotherapist and supervisor, Professor Charlotte Sills, introduced bounded instability as part of her interactive presentation at an Association for Coaching (AC) conference in 2016.<sup>1</sup> Sills was drawing on the work of Ralph Stacey and complexity theory.<sup>2</sup> Stacey's contribution to systems theory explores how within any organisation, there is both what can be deemed the 'legitimate system', ie what is known and established, and the 'shadow system'. The legitimate system relates to the hunger for structure, as illustrated in the left circle on Figure 1, above. It seeks out information that will reinforce and strengthen the *status quo*. There is a tendency not to interrogate or dispute information that fits within this legitimate system, so its values and approach are reinforced to ensure survival of the organisation and to make efficient uses of the resources within it. Information may be used to problem solve but not to change the structures of the organisation. Organisational trainers Argyris and Schön describe this as 'single loop learning', where information or behaviour that doesn't seem to fit within the system is suppressed.<sup>3</sup> If this state is maintained for too

long, it will lead to stagnation and the organisation slowly poisons itself.

The shadow system is concerned with future survival, to what needs to be allowed in that is fresh and which may dispute existing assumptions. The kind of learning that can occur here is called 'double loop learning' in that it brings in new information, which may lead to the need to change the structure.<sup>4</sup> This means thinking more deeply about existing assumptions and beliefs and may mean discarding some previous ways of feeling, thinking and behaving.

Argyris and Schön posit that the shadow system pulls the organisation towards chaos, which is often when an organisation is in a creative state but is also more likely to destroy itself.<sup>3</sup> Stacey describes how an organisation in a place of bounded instability is hovering between the states of equilibrium and chaos, so that the strengths of both the legitimate and the shadow system can be drawn on.<sup>2</sup> In her presentation, Sills expanded on the importance of relationship to hold this connection.<sup>1</sup>

The opportunity for creativity where these two systems intersect can be seen then as a place of paradox rather than contradiction. Jungian analysts, Johnson and Ruhl, describe how while '...contradiction can grind your contentment to bits... paradox is the healing balm that we need so badly, for it embraces all reality... you must allow both sides'.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, writer Brene Brown asserts: 'The paradox is one of our most valuable spiritual possessions... only the paradox comes anywhere near to comprehending the fullness of life.'<sup>6</sup>

This embracing of paradox and ways of thinking about the complexity within ourselves and within the systems and societies of which we are part seems ever more pressing in a world of reductive soundbites and entrenched and bitter polarisation between people holding tightly to different ideologies, while making the position of the other wrong. This reductive tendency to want to choose between two polarities can also occur internally.

### The internal paradox

Recognising the value in apparently contradictory positions within the self, is a perspective that I had previously gained from training as a Gestalt therapist in 1990, and it continues to be invaluable in my coaching practice with organisational leaders today. A genuine appreciation of what each part or position can bring releases energy into our system, rather than draining it through an either/or choice that makes one position or stance erroneous. Holding each part in respectful acknowledgement honours the paradox, and by staying present to different aspects within ourselves, we can find the place of integration. As people, we might naturally favour one extreme or another. Authors, mindfulness teachers and coaches Chaskalson and McMordie explain: 'We all have our own triggers, issues that move us into rigidity or chaos, perhaps due to unprocessed or unresolved aspects of our personal history'.<sup>7</sup> This idea builds on the metaphor, used by psychiatrist, psychotherapist and author Daniel Siegel, of a river, to illustrate the flow of connection in the middle of the river between the left side and right side of the brain: 'These two banks... of rigidity on the one hand, and chaos on the other, help us know when something is missing. And that something is called integration... When we're integrated, when we link different parts of our internal world and our relationships, we're in the flow of a river that has the sense of harmony; it's flexible, it's adaptive, it has a coherence to it that holds together, and that's energized and stable'.<sup>8</sup> If we get snagged on the left bank of the river, there is a sense of emotional aridity. On the right bank is the possibility of emotional overwhelm and flooding.

I have seen many examples of this 'snagging' in my coaching, where a person feels they need to fix on the 'truth' of themselves, or what they want, in a quick or rigid way. Sharing this diagram with clients can rapidly lead to insight about what they need to value in themselves and others that both relates to order, structure and predictability, and at the same time also to innovation, not knowing and allowing new and different information to come into and change the system.

The holding together of reliable structure and the emergent 'not knowing' is where we can be at our most potent, and supports the change we are often looking for in coaching. This can be particularly pertinent when we are coaching leaders, who need to be able to value a sense of coherence and also embrace a more agile exploration of the need for innovation and change.

As Johnson and Ruhl outline, we seek structure, form and meaning, and then become limited by these. They describe how, initially, new organisations have great freedom and flexibility in responding to an ever-changing environment, but over time, success brings rules, regulations and procedures.<sup>9</sup> It is not surprising that we are seeing a growth in the concept of 'agile' leadership emerging from the processes of agile product development, so that something is not fixed prematurely. As McKinsey & Company have described, in an agile way of working, we 'pause to move faster', 'embrace our ignorance', 'radically reframe the question', 'set the direction not the destination' and 'test our solutions and ourselves'.<sup>10</sup>

How we work as therapists, coaches, consultants and supervisors can provide support for this paradox; to create sufficient certainty and predictability that our clients feel safe,



“

**A genuine appreciation of what each part or position can bring releases energy into our system, rather than draining it through an either/or choice that makes one position or stance erroneous**

and yet within that be encouraged to explore the edges of their own thinking, to find a way to name and create acceptance for apparent contradictions in their feelings, thoughts and desires. In coaching, as in life, there is a need for us to feel safe, but not stuck, because, as careers counsellor Howard Figler reputedly said, 'Risk is the tariff for leaving the land of predictable misery'.<sup>11</sup>

### Bounded instability and the Thinking Environment®

I seek in every area of my work to create a Thinking Environment®<sup>12</sup> and I have found this supports bounded instability, both in its intention and practice.

Designed and developed by Nancy Kline, through practice and the reflections of many other colleagues, a Thinking Environment® is about creating the conditions for everyone to think well for themselves, individually or in groups. This independent thinking is supported by 10 behaviours, or components, that have been identified and continue to be refined through repeated observation of what most reliably creates these conditions.<sup>13</sup>

Applications such as thinking pairs, dialogue, open discussion, presentations and approaches focused on diversity, supervision, mentoring, coaching and facilitating meetings, all have very specifically tuned processes, and continue to be reviewed through practice for reliability and effectiveness. While they are clearly delineated, they are not set in stone, so reliability and innovation are both consciously held in the thinking environment (TE). The juxtaposition of the words bounded and instability suggest the paradox within which a TE seems to live.

Safety is created through the agreement that the thinker will be listened to without interruption following an opening question: 'What would you like to think about and what are your thoughts?' A question that reliably generates another wave of thinking, asked slowly and thoughtfully only when the thinker indicates that they need a question, is: 'What more do you think or feel or want to say?' This certainty of process calms the nervous system and enables us to move away from what Kline has called the 'control and interrupt' structure that is often the default in our social interactions and institutions.<sup>14</sup> This predictability does not, however, constrain creativity; rather, it enables the thinker to be open to novelty and incident, to allow in something new, previously unseen, or unrealised.

As in double loop learning, the thinker is supported to allow in new information, to find and remove the untrue limiting assumptions by which they have been living, and replace them with true and liberating assumptions.

Most often, the mind does this itself when the thinking partner embodies the way of being that the 10 components support, aligning with what Kline describes as ‘...the innate splendour of the mind’s own structures.’<sup>14</sup> Thinking can flow, instead of stagnating in long-established pools or following rigid channels created by limiting assumptions. Neither is the thinker flooded by interruption or misinterpretation.

If the thinker reaches an impasse, it is usually because of a more deeply embedded, untrue limiting assumption. There are other very specific questions, depending on the outcome the thinker wants, which reliably work to enable them to find this key assumption, determine whether it is true and create an incisive question that will enable them to find and embed a liberating assumption, all in their own words. They are then energised by the fresh information generated by the new assumption.

It takes a while to become familiar with the range of questions that work in practice, in relation to types of outcomes. The place of bounded instability is where we are both cognisant of the ‘findings’ that are well established through practice and inform what question usually reliably works best, *and* are sure not to assume that the findings are complete. Instead, we keep exquisite attention on the mind of the thinker in the creative space between what is known and not known, to see what will emerge. The pause between thoughts is often rich and fertile, and not something to be rushed past to get to the next clever coaching question.

As TE practitioners, we regularly think together, which is how I met and worked with **Julia Makhubela**, who provides here such a beautiful example of using bounded instability in her work as a diversity, equity and inclusion consultant. Julia is the founder of 54twentyfour, an organisation that partners with executives to help them design their organisation’s inclusive employee experience. She has extensive experience in leadership development, team development and culture transformation, and is passionate about creating organisations that are inclusive and good for human beings.

The work Julia has facilitated so skilfully, is an example of what the musician and writer Nick Cave calls a ‘good faith conversation’: ‘A good faith conversation begins with curiosity. It looks for common ground while making room for disagreement. It should be primarily about exchange of thoughts and information rather than instruction, and it affords us, among other things, the great privilege of being wrong; we feel supported in our unknowing and, in the sincere spirit of inquiry, free to move around the sometimes-treacherous waters of ideas. A good faith conversation strengthens our better ideas and challenges, and hopefully corrects, our low-quality or unsound ideas.’<sup>16</sup>

## Using the bounded instability model in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI): a case study

### Julia Makhubela

With its history of colonialism and apartheid, South Africa is a socially stratified country – divided and unequal – in significant ways along social group lines that include race, gender, sexuality and ability.

I was born in 1986. At the time, in South Africa, apartheid was still in place, meaning I spent the first eight years of my life in a culture and legal system that forced different racial groups to live and develop separately and unequally.

My mother started working in 1988, in a factory, doing what was overtly referred to as ‘women’s work’. I started working in 2008, as a knowledge worker, the first in my family. While my work wasn’t labelled women’s work, I would often experience male colleagues turning to me in meetings and asking me to do ‘office housework’, for example, taking notes or ordering lunch. I have since come to understand that these microaggressions are often unconscious.

While the law had changed, and there was an intolerance of overt discrimination, I didn’t experience the workplace as inclusive. In 2018, I decided to change my career to focus on workplace diversity, equity and inclusion, because I experienced that as one of the biggest challenges of my career. I now help organisations to deliberately design their employee experience to be equitable and inclusive, and I design and deliver learning experiences on diversity and social intelligence.

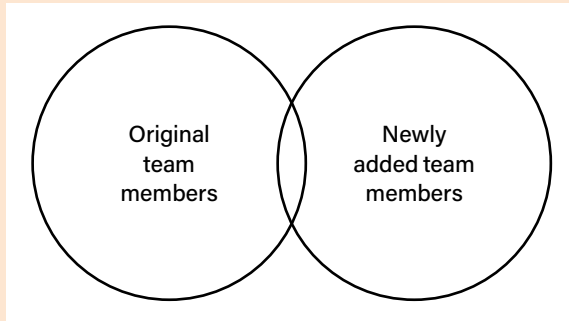
When working with a diverse team, I have often found that the team splits itself into groups, and sometimes the split is two groups: one group representing people who have been historically included in the workplace and thus have institutional knowledge, networks and credibility, and another group that was historically excluded and comes with new ideas of how things could be done. These group formations mimic the bounded instability model (new versus status quo) and reflect South Africa’s social norms.





A few months ago, I worked with a team that had formed these two groups:

**Figure 2** Two unofficial groups that existed in one team due to team conflict



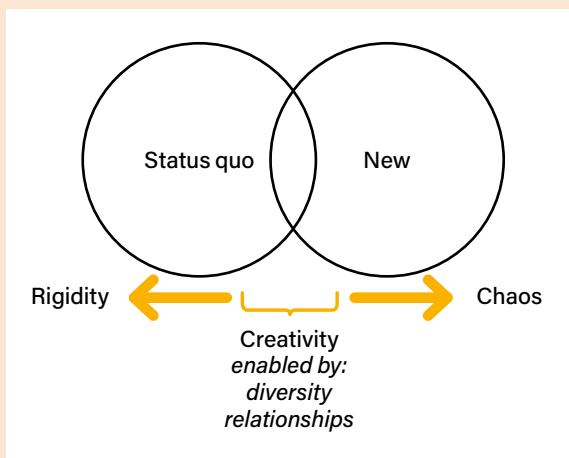
The 'original team members' had established ways of working, relationships and norms that had led to their success for years. When the 'newly added team members' joined the team, they came with new ideas to improve the ways of working and norms and that led to a defensive reaction from the 'original' team members. The 'newly added team members' read this as rigidity and short-sightedness. This conflict affected productivity and profit.

The 'original team members' were predominantly white South Africans, and the 'newly added team members' were predominantly black South Africans. This came with a layer of mistrust and psychological danger because of our history in South Africa, and the current segregation that exists among races outside of workplaces.

My role was to coach the team to move from 'storming' to 'norming', then to 'performing'.<sup>15</sup>

In our first session, I presented the bounded instability model:

**Figure 3** Creativity enabled by diverse relationships



Working through the bounded instability model and spending time discussing views from both sides – the *status quo* and the new – the group visibly moved from the storming to norming phase of team development and recognised the opportunity to innovate.

Working with the model, our initial focus was to develop relationship skills, such as listening to understand and having empathic responses versus listening to reply or having defensive or judgmental responses. These meta skills enabled people to consider different perspectives, to share their differing views and negotiate a way forward that would leverage the diversity within the team.

We had a total of three, two-hour team coaching sessions, reverting to the model, unpacking what worked from the status quo and what was valuable about the new.

I recently visited the offices where the team is based, I was notified that they are now one of the best performing teams.

The bounded instability model is now a part of my diversity, equity and inclusion toolkit, and I also use it when I am negotiating with myself to open up to new ideas or people who are different from me.

### Emergent growth

I have been much taken with the idea of rewilding, as described by Isabella Tree.<sup>17</sup> At Knepp Estate, many of the assumptions made from within a human-dominated, industrialised, systematised, agricultural approach were overturned when nature was given a freer rein and biodiversity was able to regenerate: 'Managed with minimal human intervention, and with herds of free-roaming animals driving the creation of new habitats, their rewilded land is now heaving with life. Rare species like turtle doves, nightingales, peregrine falcons and purple emperor butterflies are now breeding at Knepp, and biodiversity has rocketed.'<sup>17</sup>

The land is still managed to some extent, but nature is consciously allowed to flourish in previously unpredicted ways. Bounded instability in this sense might describe a broader dynamic overlap beyond individuals and organisations, where we cultivate ways of being and doing, which loosen an overly rigid and dominating approach, allowing nature to innovate and create for itself, to contribute in ways yet unknown, to the growing and flourishing of the wider world. It was in this book that I first learned about the mycelium fungal network that connects all the trees in an ecosystem through a dynamic sharing of information and resources.

“

**How we work as therapists, coaches, consultants and supervisors can provide support for this paradox; to create sufficient certainty and predictability that our clients feel safe, and yet within that be encouraged to explore the edges of their own thinking**

Our BACP special interest group, Coaching for Social Impact, is, we hope, another example of this process. Members of this group are likely to be coaching those who are experiencing social disadvantage or those who want to make a social impact. We want to provoke change, enable socially progressive actions, and bring coaching opportunities into the lives of people where it would not normally be an option. This group has been beautifully supported by the structures within BACP to produce an event and a report. However, from the outset we have also consciously sought to connect with other coaches and practitioners outside the BACP membership, to ensure that we are being challenged by and learning from their experience, and through them to enquire and learn directly from those in communities who would not otherwise have had access to coaching.

Our Coaching for Social Impact logo, created by designer Kara Sims, is inspired by the mycelium network.<sup>18</sup> We don't know exactly where the connections will be made or to what exactly, because our aim is to allow emergent growth, bounded within the supporting structure of our website, regular articles here in *Coaching Today* and facilitated meetings and events that bring people together to consider the questions arising from this ground-breaking work. As coach and author Hetty Einzig has asserted in her book, *The Future of Coaching*: 'We need this dynamism for thinking to take place – secure holding to feel a measure of containment but flowing enough to test ourselves and allow change.'<sup>19</sup> ■

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



##### **Carolyn Mumby**

is a coach offering an integration of coaching and therapy in her practice with

individuals, leaders and organisations. She is also a supervisor, trainer and writer. Previously Chair of BACP Coaching, Carolyn is a founder member of the Coaching for Social Impact special interest group.

[www.carolynmumby.com](http://www.carolynmumby.com)

[www.workingtitlesleadership.com](http://www.workingtitlesleadership.com)

[carolyn.mumby@gmail.com](mailto:carolyn.mumby@gmail.com)

#### REFERENCES

- 1 Sils C. Responding to uncertainty (presentation). In the system. Association for Coaching conference. London. September 2016.
- 2 Stacey RD. Complexity and creativity in organisations. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler; 1996.
- 3 Argyris C, Schön D. Theory in practice: increasing professional effectiveness. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; 1974.
- 4 Cartwright S. Double-loop learning: a concept and process for leadership educators. *Journal of Leadership Education* 2002; 1(1).
- 5 Johnson RA, Ruhl JM. Contentment: a way to true happiness. San Francisco: Harper; 1999.
- 6 Brown B. Braving the wilderness. London: Penguin; 2017.
- 7 Chaskalson M, McMordie M. Mindfulness for coaches. London and New York: Routledge; 2018.
- 8 Siegel D. Mindsight: the new science of personal transformation. New South Wales: Scribe Publications; 2009.
- 9 Johnson RA, Ruhl J. Living your un-lived life: coping with unrealized dreams and fulfilling your purpose in the second half of life. New York: Penguin; 2007.
- 10 De Smet A, Lurie M, St George A. Leading agile transformation: the new capabilities leaders need to build 21st-century organisations. McKinsey and Company; 2018.
- 11 Stone B. Taking action in a hostile environment. London: Palgrave MacMillan; 1997.
- 12 Kline N. Time to think: the thinking environment. [Online.] [www.timetothink.com/thinking-environment](http://www.timetothink.com/thinking-environment)
- 13 Kline N. Time to think: the ten components. [Online.] [www.timetothink.com/thinking-environment/the-ten-components](http://www.timetothink.com/thinking-environment/the-ten-components)
- 14 Kline N. More time to think. London: Cassell; 2015.
- 15 Tuckman BW. Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin* 1965; 63(6): 384.
- 16 Cave N. The red hand files. [Online.] 2022; November: (212).
- 17 Tree I. Wilding: the return of nature to a British farm. London: Picador; 2019.
- 18 [www.coaching4socialimpact.com/](http://www.coaching4socialimpact.com/)
- 19 Einzig H. The future of coaching. London and New York: Routledge; 2017.